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Issue 174



BLUE EXORCIST: KYOTO SAGA

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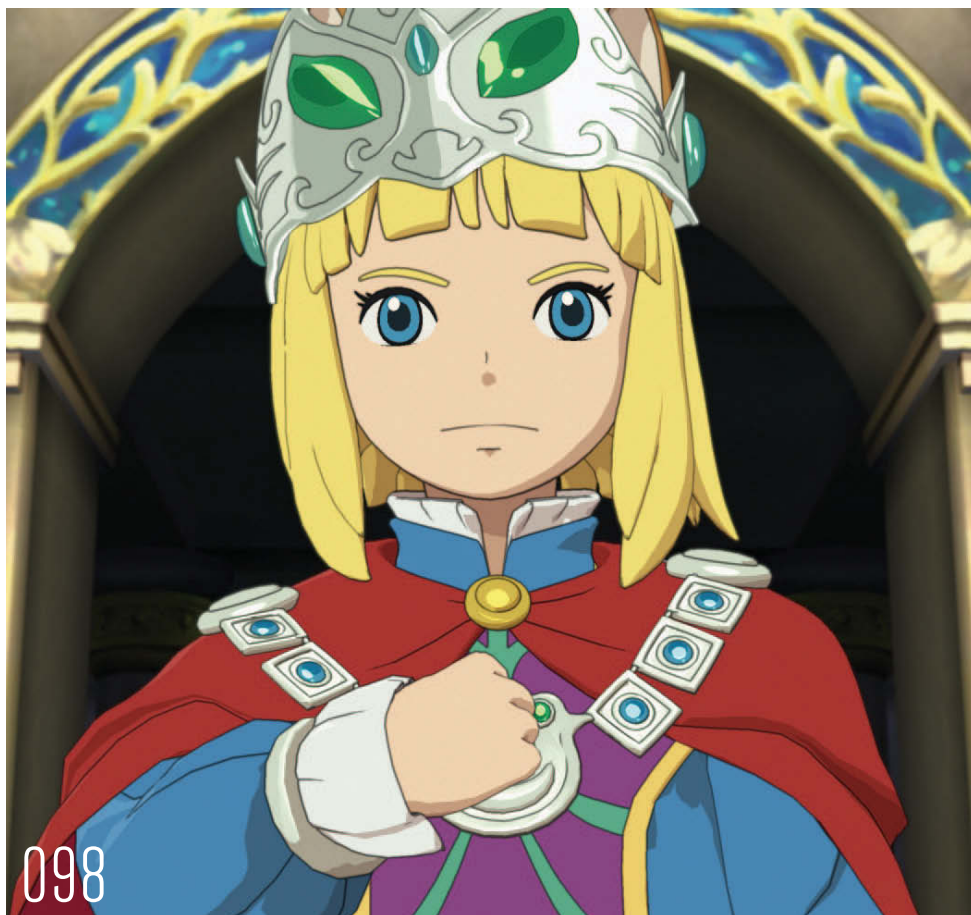
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WELCOME

WELCOME TO issue 174 of NEO! This issue we've given the cover over to the continuing adventures of *Blue Exorcist*, as Manga Entertainment prepares to launch the first part of *Kyoto Saga* in the next month. Modern audiences have had to get used to a variety of franchise reboots, some more confusing than others, and if you wanted a guide to how *Blue Exorcist* resets the action from the original series, check in on our huge feature on page 008!

We have another big guide to a new series on page 056, as the idol adventures of *Love Live!* continue with *Sunshine!!*. Join us as we chart the cutest moments of the show, and also find out who's who in their roster of wannabe songstresses!

If you flip this issue, you'll find a feature all about Level 5's much-anticipated follow up to *Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch*. Mitch and I got to spend some time playing the game at Bandai Namco's swanky preview event, and we can't wait to get our hands on a finished copy! Until then, you'll have to kick back with a guide to what's new in *Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom*, which starts on page 098!

Of course, there's plenty more content in this issue, from previews on page 030 to Jonathan Clements' always insightful manga commentary on page 040. We even have a guide to Japan's abandoned theme parks on page 034... so what are you reading this for? Dig in and enjoy!

Until next time!



GEMMA COX, EDITOR

MEET THE TEAM

ADAM MILLER



"My sinus seems to know it's spring before I do! As the temperature raises a degree or two, I'm attacked with a wave of violent pollen that

leaves me even groggier than usual; but at least it leads to my favourite time of year... cherry blossoms!"

DAVID WEST



"A treat to see Nobuhiko Obayashi's *House* come to Blu-ray this month, and I've been rocking out to BAND-MAID's

World Domination. Who knew maids would be the ones to seize power and rule the world?"

TOM SMITH



"Shouting at my Apple Homepod to play Japanese music is a bit hit and miss, so I've made my own playlist of fave

tracks! Have a listen on Spotify / Apple Music by searching for "jpurecords!"

MITCHELL LINEHAM



"I'm distraught that there are now only four episodes of *Citrus* left, but I have finally begun reading the *Sailor*

Moon manga and I have finally reached Heavensward in *Final Fantasy XIV*!"

ANDREW OSMOND



"The Japan Foundation's Touring Film Programme is still running in some areas: jpf-film.org.uk. I recommend

Joy of Man's Desiring, about kids who lose their parents in an earthquake and have to live on."

JACOB BONIFACE



"Though the weather this month has been very cold and horrible, I've been keeping warm inside with the

seaside antics of the Aqours school idols, the crew of the new spin-off series of *Love Live*!"

JONATHAN CLEMENTS



"I've been checking subs on Mari Okada's *Maquia* for the UK premiere - trying to work out the right language for elfin dialogue,

and not singing "Save Your Love, My Darling...!" every time someone says "Renato."

RUTH KEATTCH



"Good lord it's chilly! I'm going to be catching up on the next chapters of *Jarred*, and

plotting out a new title as well while I survive under a mountain of blankets!"



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RUMBLE IN KYOTO

The splendid second anime season of *Blue Exorcist* is hitting British home formats, keeping to the deeper characters and storytelling of the manga.

Andrew Osmond goes through the show's Who's Who of exorcists.

THE BOY WITH the blue fire and big mouth is back! *Blue Exorcist: Kyoto Saga* was simulcast this time last year, and now it's arriving on Blu-ray and DVD from Manga Entertainment. The first volume, carrying the opening six episodes, is released on 26 March. The concluding half is due on 28 May.

This is *Blue Exorcist*'s second anime season, once again produced by A-1 Pictures, makers of *Sword Art Online* and *Fairy Tail*. It looks and sounds very like its predecessor, though it has a much more integrated, serial-style story. All your favourite *Exorcist* characters and voice actors have carried over, both in Japanese and English. Actually the biggest staff change is the director, as Tensai Okamura, who'd helmed the first season, steps aside for Koichi Hatsuma, who previously adapted *Deadman Wonderland* to anime. (Don't worry, he doesn't send *Blue Exorcist* in that direction!)

Blue Exorcist fans who know about the continuity issues can skip this next bit. Basically, *Kyoto Saga* gets the anime back in synch with the source manga by Kazue Kato. The first anime adapted the early manga chapters for about two-thirds of the TV episodes; then it chose to invent its own climax and ending to wrap things up. *Kyoto Saga* rewinds the story to just after part 15 of season one. That's when Amaimon attacked the exorcists during their summer camp, and Rin was forced to reveal he was Satan's son to the shocked class.

For the purposes of *Kyoto Saga*, none of the first season's last third happened; or if you prefer, it happened on an alternative timeline. That applies to the spinoff *Blue Exorcist: The Movie* as well. It's a bold move for a franchise, assuming that

the audience is well-informed enough to not be confused by a half-sequel, half-reboot. Then again, for anyone who follows superhero movies...

The important thing is that *Kyoto Saga* can develop its characters and world in step with the manga. And it's soon clear that character development and world building are very important in *Kyoto Saga*. The main cast have just had a huge shock – they've been having lessons with Satan's spawn! Right then, when they're under such strain, there's a new crisis in the *Blue Exorcist* world. It involves some of the students' homes and families, and threatens to split the characters further.

THE ROOSTER GOES HOME

Whereas many of the first season adventures were episodic, *Kyoto Saga* is a cohesive 12-part serial. It has a credible enemy – the turncoat Exorcist Todo – with a masterplan. There are intertwining character arcs and conflicts, developed all through the season. Rin is still the hero, and his brother Yukio has a crucial plot arc too. But beyond them, pretty much all Rin's classmates are more dimensional, especially the rooster-haired Ryuji, who now has a full-blown backstory and intense family drama.

The story begins when Todo steals a deadly artefact, the Left Eye of the Impure King. Rin and the other exorcists are bundled off to Kyoto, where a sect of exorcists guards the remaining Eye. The next pages go through the main characters, both old and new, pointing out some of their relationships and issues (though with minimal spoilers). Even if you've seen the series already, or read the manga, *Kyoto Saga* is a rich story in its own right; well worth revisiting. >>>



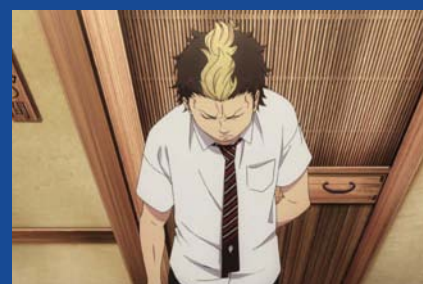
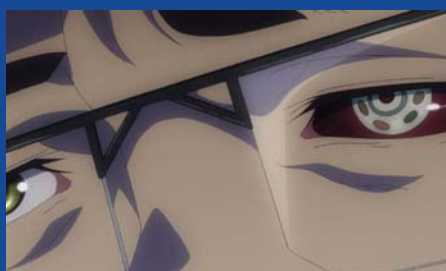
WHO'S WHO OF EXORCISTS



SABURATA TODO

The devious, very dangerous adversary of this season, who's after the lethal Eyes of the Impure King for his own dark purposes. In the beginning, Todo is a respected but slightly wimpish-seeming exorcist and teacher, before he shows his true colours with gloating relish. Like the best villains, his true power is the force of his personality. He manipulates and controls more than one character in the series by playing on their suspicions and insecurities.

In Japanese, Todo is voiced by Kazuhiro Yamaji, a veteran actor who's crossed between live-action film, TV and anime. Yamaji often dubs Jason Statham, Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe, Willem Dafoe and Christopher Weitz. In the current anime season, he voices the commanding grandfather in *Kokkoku* (see page 030).



RYUJI SUGURO

Ryuji is arguably the most central character in this season, even more than Rin. The crisis in Kyoto forces him to come back to his home turf, where we learn much about his family and background. In particular, we learn about Ryuji's troubled relationship with his dad, the eccentric priest Tatsuma. Ryuji adored Tatsuma as a child, listening to his father recite Buddhist sutras as if they were lullabies and memorising them himself. Ryuji thought his destiny would be to inherit his father's position as head of the Myoda sect and work with him to defeat Satan.

But Ryuji was shocked when Tatsuma inexplicably abandoned his responsibilities to become a solitary slob. Moreover, Tatsuma refused to support his son going to train as an exorcist at True Cross Academy. Now Ryuji speaks as if his deadbeat dad means nothing to him, though of course his feelings are more tortured.

On a lighter note, Ryuji is discomforted when his class ends up staying at the old-style Kyoto inn which is run by his mother. In contrast to her son's more colourful appearance, Ryuji's mother turns out to be a graceful, genteel Japanese lady... who flies into a rage when she sees her son's yellow-dyed "rooster" hair!



KONEKOMARU MIWA

Like Ryuji, Konekomaru finds the return to Kyoto, his home town, emotionally hard. Both his parents are deceased – his father was killed during the "Blue Night" disaster – which makes him the young head of his family. As he was still a child when he was orphaned, he was raised by the other adults in the Myoda sect and is determined to repay them some day. His ingrained sense of responsibility makes him different from both the rebellious Ryuji and the lackadaisical Renzo.

Konekomaru tries to avoid Rin as much as possible, fearing that he's a threat to his home. He attempts to support Ryuji, his friend from childhood, who he can see is going through a tough time as well, but without success.





RIN OKUMURA

Rin isn't the sharpest hero in the world of anime. Although he has revealed to his classmates that he's Satan's son, blue fire and all, at first he thinks it won't have any affect on the way they respond to him. Consequently, Rin needs it spelled out to him that this is a very serious matter indeed.

Three of Rin's classmates – Ryuji, Renzo and Konekomura – all lost family members 16 years ago, in the so-called Blue Night disaster when Satan slew numerous exorcists. For that reason, most of his peers now regard him with suspicion, fear, or outright anger.

Since Rin entered True Cross Academy, he and his fellow exorcists had been shaping up, not only as a demon-fighting team, but also as a circle of friends. With his demonic identity kept secret, Rin was able to develop like a normal adolescent. Now he must cope with being an outsider again, facing rejection by the people he thought he knew.

Luckily Rin is still a typical anime hero. He's not given to angsty self-pity but rather to reckless charges into danger. At the same time, he must learn *self-control*; specifically, being able to control the blue fire that terrifies those around him with memories of the Blue Night. That means intense training with his harsh tutor Shura, though Rin can't resist calling her ruder names, even with his life in the balance!



YUKIO OKUMURA

The season starts with Yukio already at loggerheads with his twin brother. In the first episode, they're trying to save a little boy who's been kidnapped. Rin cheerily assures the frantic mother that he'll rescue the child, only for Yukio to cut in and coldly inform the woman that the mission may fail and she should prepare for the worst. It's a rather chilling sign of the difference in the twins' mentalities.

In the subsequent skirmish, in which the villain is revealed to be the traitor exorcist Todo, Yukio is seriously rattled by the taunting of his enemy. Todo boasts about how he broke free of the influence of his own father and big brother to pursue his own path, and suggests that Yukio must do the same.

In this season, both Yukio and Rin will have their family situation reflected back to them by other people: Yukio by the manipulative Todo, and Rin by witnessing the father-son clash between Ryuji and Tatsuma. Yukio doesn't accompany Rin to Kyoto at first, but their paths will cross there soon enough. Of course Yukio will end up confronting Todo again, and his own deepest feelings...



SHURA KIRIGAKURE

Now that Rin faces execution if he loses control of his powers, Shura's monitoring and training of the lad takes on paramount importance. When Rin and his fellow exorcists are sent to Kyoto, Shura grumpily accompanies them as their supervisor. Admittedly, she's perhaps not the best supervisor for minors. Leaving aside her dress sense, there's also an unfortunate incident where the kids' soft drinks get accidentally swapped with Shura's own beer!

She's still a tough taskmaster, but now she's Rin's most important ally. There's a suggestion of a growing rapport between student and teacher, and it's hinted that she may understand him better than any other character in the show.

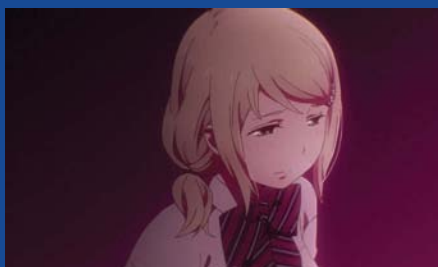
WHO'S WHO OF EXORCISTS (continued)

SHIEMI MORIYAMA

Despite her almost manically kind nature, Shiemi finds it well-nigh impossible to *look* at Rin, let alone interact with him, after learning that he's Satan's son. Whether she's avoiding him for the same reasons as her classmates isn't clear at first. Shiemi is also fretting over her own value to the exorcist team. She can no longer summon her leafy familiar Nee to help her, and she panics that she's chronically out of her league, just hindering the others.

Oddly enough, she gets pepped up by the big-browed girl Izumo, who offers her the extremely backhanded "compliment" that she's resilient like a weed. Luckily, Shiemi just *loves* weeds!

While Shiemi seems sidelined in the opening episodes, left to do backup jobs while the other characters are off fighting and adventuring, we can say that she gets big moments later on, and they're not just token scenes. In a particularly nice touch, one of her opportunities to save the day comes when a magic being foolishly presumes that Shiemi can pose no threat to it! And when the really big battles kick off in later episodes, it's not Shiemi who's the damsel in distress...



THE IMPURE KING

The Impure King is a demon which spread plagues in Edo-era Kyoto, killing some 40,000 people. Legend says this monster was defeated by a Buddhist priest called Fukaku, who was the ancestor of Tatsumi and Ryuji. According to the legend, Fukaku plucked out the Impure King's Left Eye and Right Eye. The Left Eye is stolen by Todo at the beginning of the series, while the Right Eye is guarded by the Myoda Sect founded by Fukaku.

Both eyes are highly dangerous artefacts in themselves, spreading poison miasma. However (slight spoiler), the Impure King doesn't just stay as a disembodied pair of eyeballs, and eventually manifests in a spectacular manner!



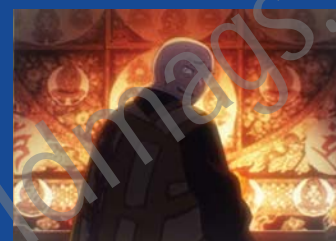
TATSUMA SUGURO

Like his son Ryuji, Tatsuma is one of the most important characters in this season. He's certainly the most mysterious – is he a fool, a villain, or something else again?

At first, he seems no more than an embarrassment. Once, Tatsuma was respected as the head of the Myoda sect founded in Kyoto by his heroic ancestor Fukaku, who vanquished the monstrous Impure King. Later, though, Tatsuma made controversial decisions after his father, the previous high priest, was killed in the Blue Night disaster. Tatsuma affiliated the Myoda sect with the Order of the True Cross, and gave up his daily responsibilities.

Now he may still be high priest in name, but he seems to be just a booze-sodden bum. Oddly, when Rin meets him, he likes him exactly for that reason! Tatsuma reminds Rin of his own lost human father, Shiro, who was rather a shambles himself.

And much like Shiro, Tatsuma seems to harbour dark secrets. That's enough for other characters to suspect that Tatsuma could be another traitor, an ally of Todo. Could Tatsuma be corrupt enough to steal the deadly artefact that his shrine has guarded through the generations? Why does he react so strongly when he sees Rin for the first time? Later on, we'll learn that Tatsuma is tied into *Blue Exorcist's* backstory in a very deep way...





RENZO SHIMA

Like his classmates, Renzo is wary of Rin at first, but it only takes only a few moments for him to accept the demon boy. However, Renzo himself suggests this isn't out of a wish to do the right thing, but because it's too much hassle to avoid Rin's company. This will become an important point. Renzo may not be a suspected traitor, but is he motivated by any sense of duty to his family and classmates? Or does he just take the easy course?

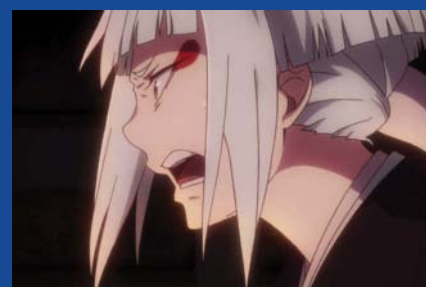
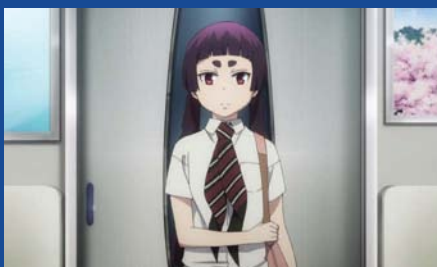
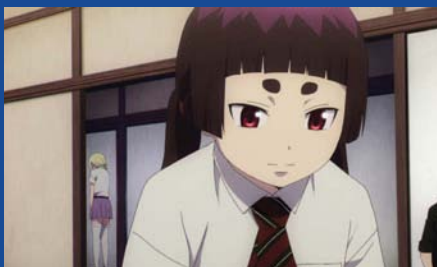
We also meet Renzo's family. His scarred, tough father Yaozo effectively commands the Myoda sect together with fellow exorcist Uwabami. Renzo's brothers are Kinzo, with yellow hair, and Juzo, who has a fractious relationship with Uwabami's daughter Mamushi.



IZUMO KAMIKI

In one of the more heart-warming surprises of the series, the haughty Izumo is Rin's only classmate who *doesn't* shun him. Although it's not stated, it's likely she's learned a lesson from one of the first season episodes where Izumo shunned Shiemi cruelly, before being brought down several pegs. She's still Izumo, though. When Rin realises she's actually being kind to him, she's outraged by the suggestion, reflecting a series whose characters are constantly *denying* the best sides of themselves.

Izumo has a limited role in this season, although it's possible to see Mamushi – a rather similar character – as another version of her. Or to put it another way, Mamushi is what Izumo might have grown up to be in another life.



MAMUSHI HOJO

Mamushi is the eldest of the three daughters of the high-ranking exorcist Uwabami. The family's favoured attack is to conjure snake spirits; as if that wasn't intimidating enough, they all have coiling red snakes tattooed on their faces.

Her family is part of the Myoda sect, but Mamushi doesn't get on with the other families. In her first scene, she and Renzo's brother Juzo are practically at each other's throats over who's to blame for the attack on the sect. Mamushi is equally contemptuous of Ryuji's father, the tipsy Tattsuma.

Mamushi once studied under Todo; now that he's revealed himself as a villain, this fact puts Mamushi under suspicion as a traitor to the sect. Then again, as Mamushi points out angrily, Juzo studied under Todo too; she also casts doubt on Tattsuma.

Mamushi plays a substantial role in the season, though it can't be described without spoilers. She's voiced by Mao Ichimichi, also known as M.A.O., who's had careers in idol singing and modelling. You may know M.A.O. as the Russian assassin Vorona in the later *Durarara!!* series, Luluco in Studio Trigger's *Space Patrol Luluco* and the merry magic girl Papika in *Flip Flappers*.





Occultic; Nine: heading your way to freak you out this April.

SPRING INTO DARKNESS

Anime To Shroud The Soul In Shadow

AS SPRING USHERS in the promise of escaping winter's chilly grasp, there's no need to break out the sunscreen, as there's a bevy of anime on the way that revel in the darkness. *Occultic; Nine*, out on 2 April from Manga Entertainment, comes from the mind of Chiyomaru Shikura, the novelist behind *Chaos; HEAD*, *Steins; Gate* and *Robotics; Notes*. After time travel and robots, Shikura turns his attention to the supernatural with a story about nine different characters with a passion for the paranormal, linked together by an online blog concerning all things occult. Kyohei Ishiguro, an episode director on *Fairy Tail* and *Psycho-Pass*, oversees the series, which promises to go poking around at anything that goes bump in the night.

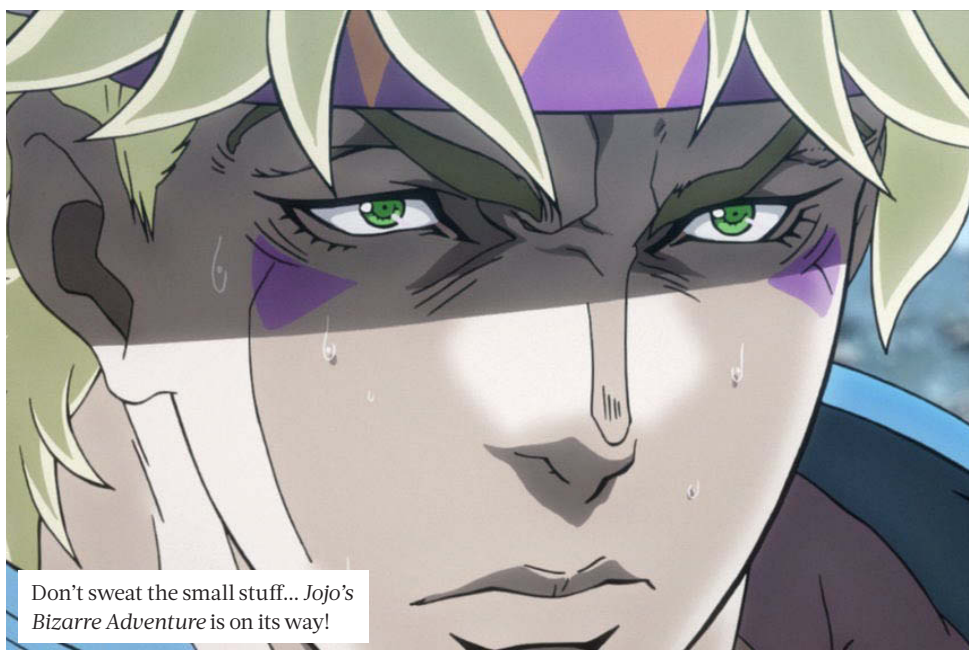
Long overdue in the UK, one of the best-selling manga series of all time finally reaches our screens in anime form when KAZE and Manga Entertainment release season one of *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* on 2 April. It's the centuries-spanning saga of how the Joestar family battles the forces of evil, including their longstanding foe, the vampire Dio Brando.

The end of March sees the arrival of the *Initial D: Legend 1 Awakening* feature from MVM, a re-boot of the classic series about nocturnal street racing. This time tofu delivery driver (apparently that's a job now) Takumi Fujiwara is pulled into the rivalry between two squads of habitual Highway Code violators, the Akagi RedSuns and the Akina Speedstars. Does the humble tofu delivery man have the guts and the skills to make it in the world of the high-speed showdown? *Initial D: Legend 2 Racer* will follow on 14 May, with the final instalment, *Initial D: Legend 3 Dream*, passing the chequered flag on 25 June.

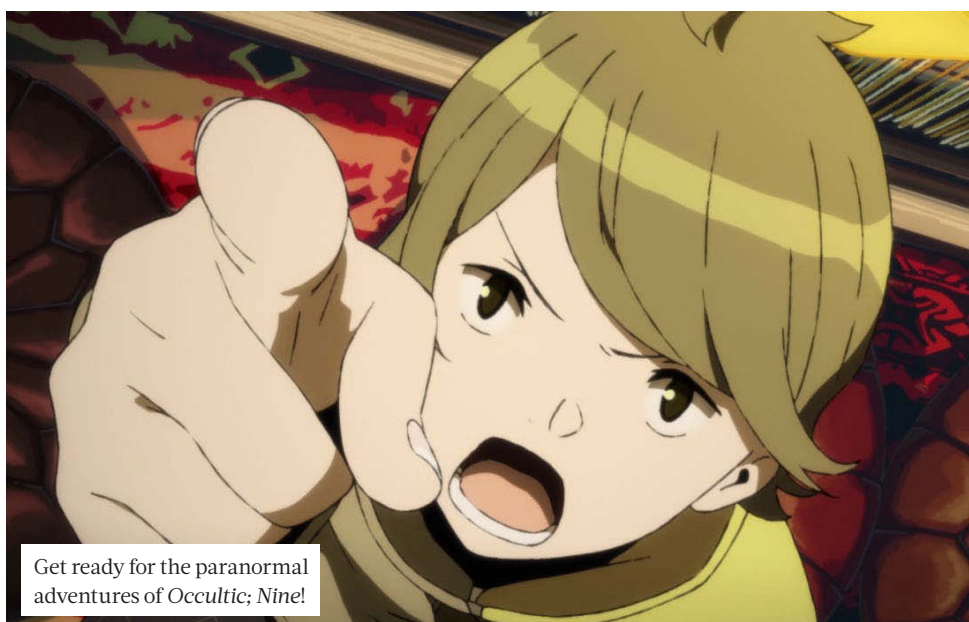
The *Fate* franchise resumes on 16 April in *Fate/Grand Order: First Order* as another struggle ensues for possession of the Holy Grail. Adapted from a smartphone game, the movie concerns the activities of the Caldea Security Organisation, an institution dedicated to science, magic, and the safeguarding of mankind. When Caldea predicts the imminent end of the world, they dispatch two agents, the magic-wielding Master Ritsuka Fujimaru and his mighty Servant Kirieraito Mashu, back in time to track down the source of the destruction – the Holy Grail – to try to stop the chain of events leading to annihilation before it can start. But they're not the only ones hungry to get their hands on the Grail.

It's just another normal day in Ginza when a gate opens and out pour a host of fantastical monsters and armoured knights. Yoji Itami is a soldier in the Japan Self-Defence Force sent through the gate to investigate the source of the attack, only to find himself in a magical land populated by dragons, witches, elves, and the beautiful Princess Pina Co Lada (no, really). Directed by Takumi Yanai, an episode director on *Accel World* and *Fairy Tail*, the fantasy adventure series *GATE* arrives on April 9 from MVM.

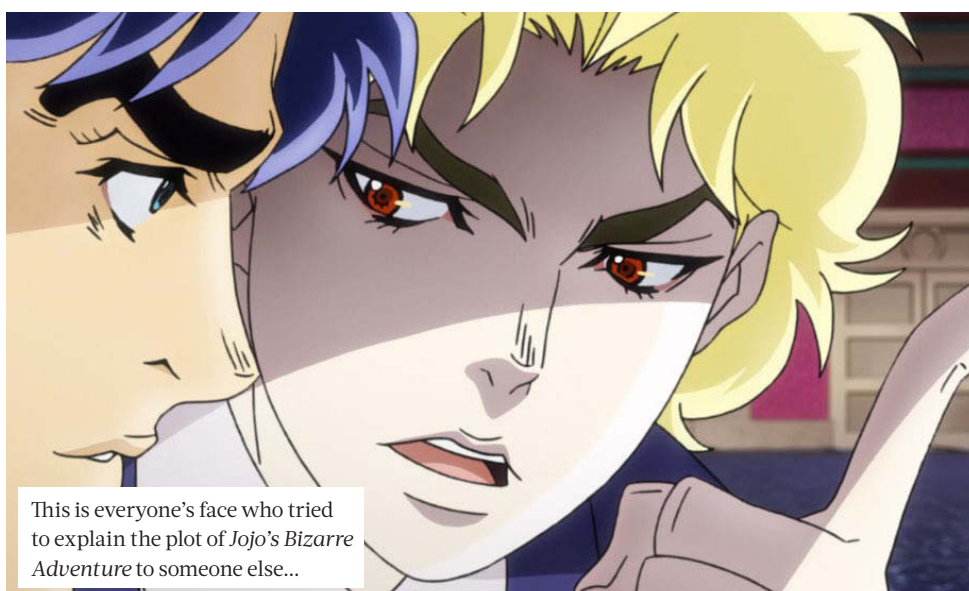
Following its debut on Netflix, *Blame!* heads for DVD and Blu-ray in May. The movie is adapted from Tsutomu Nihei's manga and directed by Hiroyuki Seshita, from the anime version of Nihei's *Knights Of Sidonia*. Join gun-slinging hero Killy as he helps the last remnants of humanity survive in a city programmed to eliminate them. The future looks dangerous, dark and desperate, just the way we like it. ●



Don't sweat the small stuff... *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* is on its way!



Get ready for the paranormal adventures of *Occultic; Nine!*



This is everyone's face who tried to explain the plot of *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure* to someone else...

THE DARK KNIGHT GETS FEUDAL

DC Comics' iconic caped crusader has always had something of the air of a ninja about him – a fondness for lurking in shadows and a proclivity for martial arts being common to both – but Gotham's greatest defender goes into full shinobi mode in the upcoming movie *BATMAN NINJA*.

Directed by Jumpei Mizusaki, with a story by Kazuki Nakashima, *BATMAN NINJA* sees the hero hurled back in time to feudal Japan by Gorilla Grodd. There, Batman and his allies Catwoman, Robin, Red Robin, and Nightwing must face the menace of the Joker, Harley Quinn, the Penguin, Deathstroke, Poison Ivy and Two-Face as they attempt to seize control of the warring samurai factions for their own nefarious ends. The movie features character designs by Takashi Okazaki, of *Afro Samurai* fame, as he reimagines the Bat Family as medieval warriors without their high-tech gadgets.

"We're hugely excited to be bringing *BATMAN NINJA* to the UK. Takashi Okazaki's stunning character design presents the Dark Knight as he's never been seen before and with the directing talent of Jumpei Mizusaki, the backdrop of feudal Japan gives a unique new tale presented with authentic anime style," says Tetsuro Satomi, President & CEO of Barnum Studio. "The UK has a wonderful anime and manga fan community, and we're pleased to be able to bring them this fantastic new film."

BATMAN NINJA will be released digitally on 24 April, followed by DVD and Blu-ray releases on 14 May from Warner Bros Home Entertainment.





//COMING UP MY HERO GAME PROJECT

OUT: 2018 // DISTRIBUTOR: BANDAI NAMCO

Kohei Horikoshi and Hirofumi Neda's manga *My Hero Academia* was the 11th top selling title in Japan last year. Now the hit series makes the transition to videogames in Bandai Namco's upcoming *MY HERO Game Project*. While the final title is still TBC, the first trailer suggests a fighting game that pits superheroes against supervillains. Characters announced so far include protagonist Izuku Midoriya, his arch-rival Katsuki Bakugo, the heroic All Might, the gravity-controlling Ochaco Uraraka, and Izuku's nemesis Tomura Shigaraki.

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TAK SAKAGUCHI [VERSUS] RE-BORN

FROM OUR SPONSORS

JONATHAN CLEMENTS HAS A FRANCHISE FOR SALE, ONE CAREFUL OWNER...

Everybody's trying really hard not to call it the end of an era. But after 48 years the Toshiba Corporation is no longer the chief sponsor of the *Sazae-san* cartoon.

Based on Machiko Hasegawa's mild-mannered comic series, which itself ran from 1946 to 1974, *Sazae-san* has always been a time-capsule of post-war Japan. Its leading characters, a family with three children and several relatives, led by the titular harassed housewife, were always intended to be timeless. Scriptwriter Masaki Tsuji once explained that the stories were supposed to be as taboo-free as possible, sure to catch the largest possible viewership on primetime. But they were also decreed to be free of bad language, modern slang and electronic devices.

Sazae-san lives in a Japan untroubled by right-wing nationalism or looney religious cults, where nobody has heard of Tinder or Facebook. She has become a living fossil – even her three-child family is an outmoded phenomenon in a Japan where few can afford more than one kid.

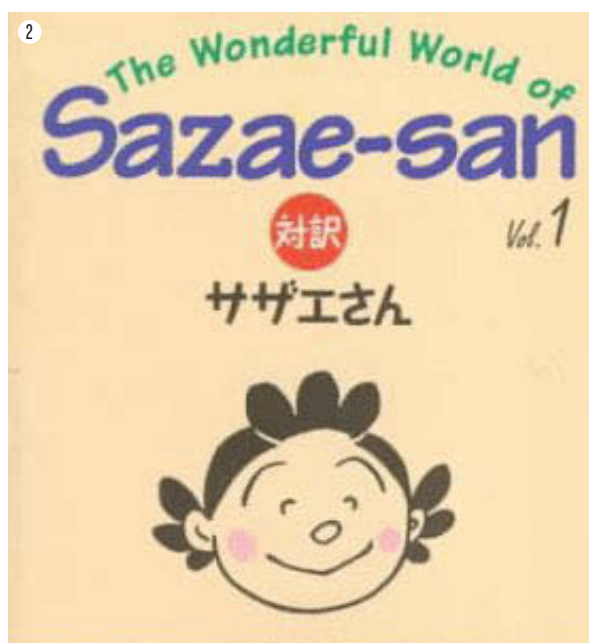
If you haven't heard of her, then you can blame her late creator, whose contracts, signed before most of you were born, stipulated no spin-offs, which has also been

"SAZAE-SAN LIVES IN A JAPAN UNTRoubLED BY RIGHT-WING NATIONALISM OR LOONEY RELIGIOUS CULTS, WHERE NOBODY HAS HEARD OF TINDER OR FACEBOOK. SHE HAS BECOME A LIVING FOSSIL – EVEN HER THREE-CHILD FAMILY IS AN OUTMODED PHENOMENON IN A JAPAN WHERE FEW CAN AFFORD MORE THAN ONE KID."

interpreted as meaning a ban on videos and DVDs.

That hasn't stopped *Sazae-san* being the top-rated cartoon on Japanese television, and the longest-running cartoon series in the world. And all through her broadcasting history, Toshiba has paid the big bucks to top and tail every episode with whatever is up to the minute in electronics – air conditioners, washing machines, faxes and laptops. For the first 30 years, Toshiba was the sole sponsor, and even sneaked some of its devices into the show itself in early product placements.

But now that all has to change. Stumbling in the American atomic energy market and reeling from a series of accounting scandals, Toshiba can't afford to keep fronting the cash. Instead, it gave the producers a season's head start to find new sponsors, and officially bows out this March.



1. A family fossilised in time, and free from controversial worries and bothers. Must be nice. 2. If you want to enjoy *Sazae-san*, then bilingual manga from Kodansha is one of the few options for westerners.

Is this the end for *Sazae-san*? Fortunately not – although nobody has the clout to be the sole sponsor of a primetime anime, someone did rustle up a committee of new sponsors to carry the costs, replacing the old sponsor with a range of brand new ones.

Clearly seeing the viewership as a bunch of young home-makers, the baby-wares company Nishimatsu has stepped up, alongside Daiwa House, a residential builder. Another new funder is Amazon Japan, suggesting that perhaps *Sazae-san* might soon be under pressure to allow a particular kind of new spin-off after all. Could streaming episodes be in its future...? Until then, you'll have to make do with bilingual manga editions from Kodansha! ●



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NEO'S TOPTEN

Our roundup of the hottest tracks currently
blasting on the office stereo

WORDS BY TOM SMITH

1 KYARY PAMYU PAMYU – HARAJUKU IYAHOI 17-20 MAY

Get ready, Japan's most influential pop icon for a generation is about to hit these shores again – and this time she's doing things a little differently. Kyary Pamyu Pamyu will be back as part of her headline "Spooky OBAKEYSHIKI" tour, which includes a performance at Koko in Camden, London on Sunday 20 May. That's not the unusual part; she's also confirmed her first UK festival appearance too!

Kyary Pamyu Pamyu is so far the only act from Japan confirmed for new-music festival Great Escape in Brighton, taking place between 17-19 May. Which day she will perform has yet to be announced, although in the past other acts from Japan have had a showcase gig at the event and then performed a number of secret gigs around Brighton during the festival.

For the Kyary Koko show, general entry tickets are on sale now with a face value of £27.50. VIP upgrades are available for all those with a general entry ticket. The upgrade costs £78.65 (including fees) and will grant one lucky person the chance to meet and greet the Pamyumeister herself – and get an individual photo together! A VIP exclusive KPP merch gift is also included.

KPP burst onto the scene with debut single *PONPONPON* in the summer of 2011. The music video has now had 125+ million views on YouTube and the song continues to be on our playlists to this day – it's a classic! We currently have the music video to *Harajuku Iyaho!* on loop, it's simply magical! It's a B-side from Yasutaka Nakata's *Crazy Crazy* single, with the title track seeing Kyary collaborate with British pop star Charli XCX.

UK DATES!



UK DATE!



2 MIYAVI – WHAT'S MY NAME? (DAY 2 MIX) 21 APRIL

Guitar samurai MIYAVI returns to London, this time as part of his headline "DAY 2" world tour of 2018. He's been booked in for a show at ULU London on Saturday 21 April. There are three types of tickets available: General entry for £35, seated balcony tickets for £45 and early entry for £50. There's also the upgrade VVIP option to get a handshake from the six-string slapper and be part of a group photo for an extra 50 quid.

MIYAVI was recently appointed the United Nations Human Rights Council's Goodwill Ambassador and travelled to Bangladesh to play guitar and raise awareness of the children of Kutapalong, the biggest refugee camp in the world. Respect! You can see a video of his time there on his Instagram page @miyavi_ishihara.

Latest release *SAMURAI SESSIONS vol.2* is out now for digital download and streaming, and sees MIYAVI collaborate with a number of musicians, including HYDE.

BACK CATALOGUE RELEASED!



3 ROA – JAIRO.M OUT NOW!

Japan's punk-rock shamisen smashers ROA are the latest band to sign to JPU Records for all activity outside of Japan, and their first move is to drop their awesome first EP and album for digital download and streaming ahead of their recent set at Japan Expo Sud in Marseille.

ROA's unique sound juxtaposes western punk-rock spirit with traditional eastern melody, a concept they've dubbed "Wayo Settyu" – literally meaning "the blending of Japanese and western styles". They are formed by the drummer of Japan's legendary chart-topping ska-punk outfit SNAIL RAMP, who also writes all the music.

We can't get enough of them and highly recommend EP *KALACREATION*. There's something strangely hypnotic about shamisen and ROA manage to propel the three-stringed traditional instrument into the 21st century in a new and exciting way. They also have a brand-new album coming in the next few months; definitely one to keep an eye on!

UK TOUR!



4 SHONEN KNIFE – JUMP INTO THE NEW WORLD

1 APRIL – 3 MAY

Kurt Cobain's favourite band from Japan (and his old touring buddies from the *Nevermind* tour), Shonen Knife, are in the UK for a massive 19-date tour. The cute-punk action kicks off at the Wales Goes Pop! weekend at The Gate in Cardiff on 1 April and then continues around the country until passing out at Stereo in Glasgow on 3 May.

They'll be pushing latest live album *ALIVE! in Osaka*, the overseas edition of which contains a CD, DVD and alternative cover and will be released from 4 May courtesy of Good Charamel Records, the label started by Robby Takac of Goo Goo Dolls fame.

5 OTOBOKE BEAVER – ANATA WATASHI DAITA ATO YOME NO MESHI

17-19 APRIL

Kyoto riot grrrls Otokoke Beaver have the last few tickets left for their three-date whirlwind tour of Great Britain. The noise begins at CCA in Glasgow on 17 April, Brudenell Social Club in Leeds the next day, and concludes at big boy venue Scala in London on 19 April – their biggest headline show so far.

They're good fun if you're trying to learn Kansai-ben – the local dialect of Kyoto and the surrounding area – as their lyrics are full of slang terms from the prefecture! (Mind you, they're good fun even if you're not!)

NEW EP!



6 LOVEBITES – SCREAM FOR ME

6 JUNE

Double news from Tokyo's metal maidens LOVEBITES! They've just been booked for the world's biggest metal festival Wacken Open Air in Germany this August and have announced the follow up to their blazing debut album *Awakening From Abyss*.

The new mini album, *Battle Against Damnation*, features four brand new, exclusive tracks. Cover art and mastering duties will be handled by the same team as last time (who've handled illustrations for Helloween, and engineering for Nightwish, Stratovarius and more) and will be released simultaneously with Japan from 6 June.

7 WATERWEED – BEYOND THE OCEAN

Japan's punk trio Waterweed have signed to Brit label Lockjaw Records for their latest album *Brightest*, and to celebrate they've booked a European tour!

We'll be treated to five shows in the UK this April, starting at Portsmouth's Edge of the Wedge on the 18th, London's New Cross Inn on the 19th, followed by an appearance at the Manchester Punk Festival on the 21st. The boys then head to Newcastle for a show at Little Buildings (22 April) and conclude at The Star Inn in Guildford the next day, before heading to France on April 24th to continue the tour.

LONDON DATE!



9 BAND-MAID – DOMINATION OUT NOW!

The girls are back with their heaviest record to date: *WORLD DOMINATION*! The first music video just hit YouTube for album track *DOMINATION* and sees the maid-outfit donning quintet busily plot their world takeover; their ultimate goal since forming the band. It's out on CD now from JPU Records with translated lyric booklet!

NEW ALBUM!



NEW ALBUM!



8 SOIL & "PIMP" SESSIONS – FUNKY GOLDMAN

5 JULY

This famous Japanese jazz combo play music inspired by the sound and style of classic bebop and Latin jazz with a whole heap of funk and rock 'n roll spirit. "We felt that in the world of jazz, there was an unwritten rule that the musicians were to concentrate on their techniques and the audience was there to admire," explains the band. "Like a transmitter / receiver relationship. We wanted to break away from that and create exciting jazz with far more interaction between the players and the audience."

10 SCANDAL – FUTARI OUT NOW!

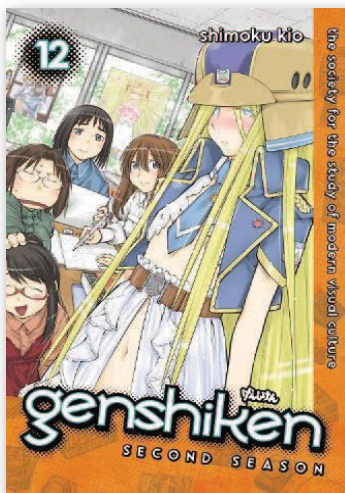
Latest album *HONEY* just hit Europe on CD via JPU and it's already going down a storm, shooting to the top of the Amazon and iTunes World Music charts! In total the record's hit number one in nine charts in Europe, and top ten in 13! The UK version includes lyric translations and a shiny cover for the initial print. Lead song *Platform Syndrome* recently hit YouTube with a full music video but it's album track *Futari* that has us hitting back over and over again!

UK release schedule



ANIME

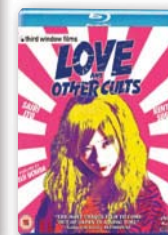
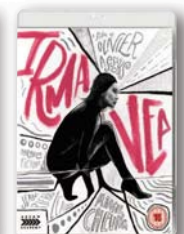
DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
19/03	Kino's Journey	Anime Limited
19/03	Persona3 Movie 1 [Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
19/03	Durarara x2 Ketsu [DVD / Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
26/03	Momotaro, Sacred Sailors [Collectors Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
26/03	Log Horizon series 1 Collection	MVM
26/03	Skip Beat Collection [DVD, Blu-ray]	MVM
26/03	Initial D Legend 1: Awakening [DVD, Blu-ray]	MVM
26/03	Blue Exorcist Kyoto Saga	Manga
26/03	Power Rangers: Dino Super Charge	Manga
02/04	Monster Musume Collection [DVD, Blu-ray]	MVM
02/04	Jojo's Bizarre Adventure	Manga
02/04	Occultic Nine	Manga
09/04	Gate Collector's Edition [Blu-ray / DVD Comb]	MVM
16/04	Fate Grand Order: First Order [DVD, Blu-ray]	MVM
16/04	Dragon Ball Z TV Specials	Manga
16/04	Ushio & Tora	Animatsu
23/04	Familiar of Zero Complete Collection [Blu-ray]	MVM
23/04	Naruto Shippuden Complete Series 8	Manga
30/04	Log Horizon series 2 Collection	MVM
30/04	ERASED - Part 2 [DVD / Collectors Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
30/04	Pokémon the Movie: I Choose You!	Manga
07/05	Fruits Basket Standard Edition [Blu-ray]	MVM
07/05	Flip Flappers Collector's Edition [Blu-ray]	MVM



MANGA

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
15/03	LDK 12	Kodansha
15/03	Genshiken: Second Season 12	Kodansha

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
15/03	The Seven Deadly Sins 25	Kodansha
15/03	UQ Holder 13	Kodansha
15/03	Land Of The Lustrous 5	Kodansha
15/03	Mobile Suit Gundam WING 5: The Glory of Losers	Vertical
15/03	Psycho-Pass: Inspector Shinya Kogami 4	Dark Horse
22/03	Cardcaptor Sakura: Clear Card 3	Kodansha
22/03	Kiss Me at the Stroke of Midnight 4	Kodansha
22/03	Wake Up, Sleeping Beauty 3	Kodansha
22/03	Flying Witch 5	Vertical
22/03	Astra Lost in Space 2	VIZ Media
22/03	Bleach 72	VIZ Media
22/03	Boruto 3: Naruto Next Generations	VIZ Media
22/03	Haikyuu!! 21	VIZ Media
22/03	Hunter X Hunter 34	VIZ Media
22/03	Kaguya-sama: Love is War 1	VIZ Media
22/03	Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess 3	VIZ Media
22/03	One Piece 3-in-1 Edition 23	VIZ Media
22/03	One-Punch Man 13	VIZ Media
22/03	Yu-Gi-Oh! Arc-V 3	VIZ Media
29/03	Princess Jellyfish 8	Kodansha
29/03	Waiting for Spring 5	Kodansha
29/03	City 1	Vertical
30/03	Die Wergelder 2	Kodansha
01/04	Ramen Master	Bruno Gmunder
05/04	Attack on Titan: Before the Fall 13	Kodansha
05/04	Fire Force 9	Kodansha
05/04	Moteki, I Love Strikes!	Vertical
05/04	Anonymous Noise 07	Shojo Beat
05/04	Bloody Mary 10	Shojo Beat
05/04	Blue Morning 7	SuBLime



ASIAN FILM

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
19/03	Legend Of The Mountain	Eureka
23/03	Pacific Rim Uprising	Universal
23/03	The Third Murder	Arrow Films
26/03	An Actor's Revenge	BFI
26/03	The Dragon Missile	88 Films
26/03	One-Armed Swordsman	88 Films
26/03	Love & Other Cults	Third Window Films
26/03	Sea Fog	88 Films
02/04	Blade Of The Immortal	Arrow Video
09/04	Hansel & Gretel	88 Films
16/04	Early Hou Hsiao-Hsien: Three Films 1980-1983	Eureka
16/04	Guardians Of The Tomb	Signature Entertainment
16/04	Seijun Suzuki: The Early Years Vol. 2. Border Crossings	Arrow Video
16/04	The Whispering Star/I Am Sion Sono	Third Window Films
23/04	Cold War 2: Extreme Measures	Cine Asia
23/04	The Super Inframan	88 Films
23/04	Cure	Eureka



INITIAL **D**

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HEDGEHOG CAFÉ!

NEO'S RESIDENT IDOL MAKES NEW FURRY FRIENDS IN TOKYO

HELLO EVERYONE! I'M Mahiru Kurumizawa from the Japanese idol group Moso Calibration.

Do you have any pets? My family has not had any pets in our home since I was born, so I'm always envious of my friends who have pets. I think this accounts for my recent addiction to animal cafés around Tokyo! So far I've been to a cat café, a rabbit café and a café with owls and hawks. Next up: hedgehogs!

This café is called 2AM's Urchin (Urchin is the middle English word for

hedgehog). Because hedgehogs are nocturnal creatures this place keeps the rooms dark, as if it's 2am! The owner will teach you how to handle the hedgehogs – he's very kind! Each hedgehog has its own character and when I picked up a girl hedgehog, a nearby boy hedgehog became jealous and was trying to get her attention. I also found out that they have much sharper needles than I expected...

As well as hedgehogs, 2AM's Urchin has other small creatures you can play with, including a degu that is named after a character from *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* – he was friendly and liked to walk on my shoulder. They also had flying squirrels, miniature mice and a very, very small pearl hamster.

I asked the owner which animal was most popular, and surprisingly a guinea pig is number one! In a hedgehog café!! But after I touched her, I realised why she's so popular. She makes a "kyun cyun" noise when you touch her, it's soooooo cute! This is a super cute sound in Japanese, and often you can hear maids in maid cafés enchant food and drinks by chanting "moe moe kyun kyun!". My friend really liked this guinea pig, so they spent a lot of time together.

When we left the café the guinea pig came to say goodbye, it's so sweet! I felt like this was animal therapy – my spirits were certainly lifted afterwards and I spent 30 minutes with a big smile on my face. Also, this café keeps my wallet happy too – the price is very reasonable! Just over £5 for 30 minutes and under £10 for an hour! If you come, please say hello to the super cute guinea pig for me.

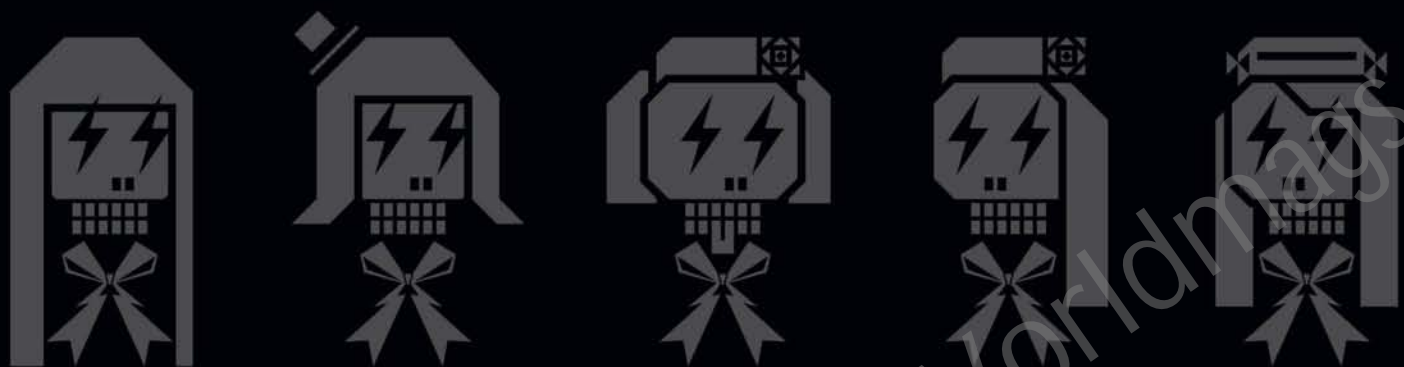
Mahiru Kurumizawa is part of Japan's idol group Moso Calibration whose music is available in the UK via JPU Records. You can follow her on Twitter (@lunch_mahiru) and Instagram (@mahiru104).



BAND-MAID



WORLD DOMINATION



WE LOVE THIS STUFF!

Check out NEO's pick of the coolest merchandise around this month



1. CAT TEES

Genki Gear's hilarious T-shirts are available in ladies and unisex in small to xx-large at £16.99 each, from www.genkgear.com.

2. AMUSE POMETAN YUMEKAWA PLUSH

AMUSE's 'yumekawa' ('dreamy-cute') Pomeranians are almost as adorable as the real thing! Available in four colours and in different sizes (13cm version pictured here) from £11.99 from www.tofucute.com.



3. UMAMI-CHAN BIG UMAI-BOU STICKS

Tasty Japanese snacks in mentai and cheese flavour, these are available for £1 individually from www.TokyoToys.com, or £23 for a pack of 30!

4. KINO NENDOROID

How adorable is this Nendoroid of Kino, from *Kino's Journey*?! Pre-order at NENDOWORLD.COM at £52.99 with free delivery within Europe!

5. GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES FRUIT DROPS TIN

Whenever we watch *Grave of the Fireflies*, we wonder why there isn't more merch. But then Japanese candy company Sakuma comes along with a collectable tin of tasty sweets in assorted flavours, available for £4.99 from www.tofucute.com, and all our prayers are answered!

6. WIDOWMAKER FIGMA

From *Overwatch* comes this Good Smile Company 16cm tall figure. Pre-order now from middlerealm.com for £74.99 including free UK postage.





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WORDS BY DAVID WEST



BIG FISH AND BEGONIA

Chinese Animation Comes Of Age

ALREADY HAILED AS the greatest achievement in Chinese animation, *Big Fish And Begonia* was a labour of love for co-directors and writers Liang Xuan and Zhang Chun. It started life as a short flash animation in 2004 which the creators decided to develop into a feature-length story. The pair spent years trying to raise the money to make the film and only succeeded thanks to an appeal on Weibo (China's answer to Twitter and Facebook) in 2013.

The story begins with Chun, who lives in a magical world unseen by humans. When she turns 16, in keeping with the custom of her people, she is allowed to visit the human world by taking the form of a red dolphin. Trapped in a fishing net, she is rescued by a human boy who dies in the process of freeing her. Moved by his sacrifice, Chun is determined to restore the boy to life and brings his soul back to her world, where he assumes the form of a small fish, which she must nurture and protect until he is ready to be returned to his home. The film blends stunning visuals with the myths and legends of ancient Chinese literature like *In Search Of The Supernatural*, *Classic Of Mountains And Seas*, and the *Book of Zhuangzi* from the 3rd century. Following its UK premiere at last year's BFI London Film Festival, Manga Entertainment are bringing *Big Fish And Begonia* to the UK with a limited theatrical run opening on 18 April.



IRMA VEP

Maggie Cheung Vamps It Up

Originally released in 1996, *Irma Vep* is one of the most fascinating films in the career of Hong Kong actress Maggie Cheung. Directed by the French filmmaker Oliver Assayas, the movie sees Cheung effectively playing herself as an actress brought to France to star in a remake of the 1915 silent film serial *Les Vampires*. Unfortunately, her director René Vidal (Jean-Pierre Léaud) seems to be losing his grip on reality, while the production's costume designer Zoe (Natalie Richard) develops a crush on Cheung even as she has to contend with the challenge of working in a strange country where she can't speak the language. A superb character study and a celebration of French cinema, *Irma Vep* comes to Blu-ray and DVD on 7 May from Arrow Academy in a new edition loaded with bonus materials, including interviews with Cheung, Richard and Assayas.

A PLAGUE OF WITCHES

JRPG Sequels Heads To UK

The once-beautiful land of Kevala has fallen victim to a plague that transforms young girls into destructive witches with a third eye in the middle of their forehead. When Amalie's younger sister Milm disappears one day, only to return with the mark of the witch on her forehead, Amalie vows to save her from this terrible fate. *The Witch And The Hundred Knight 2* is the new action JRPG from Nippon Ichi Software, the company behind the *Disgaea* series. Players take control of the Hundred Knight who must protect Amalie on her quest to free her sister from the Witches Plague. *The Witch And The Hundred Knight 2* will arrive on the PlayStation 4 on 30 March from NIS America.



Genki Gear Tshirts



Bad SUSHI

Weird, but still rather nice!

www.genkigear.com

Worldmags.net

ANIME EXPOSÉ

KOKKOKU

Time Out



AMONG SCI-FI SUB-GENRES, time-travel anime should have a good 2018. *Steins;Gate 0*, the long promised, kind-of sequel to the outstanding original *Steins;Gate*, is due on TV this April, with all the original cast. In July, *Mirai no Mirai*, or *Mirai of the Future*, will bow in Japanese cinemas; Mamoru Hosoda returns to time-travel with this story of an infant boy and his future sister.

As an *hors d'oeuvre*, this winter season offers *Kokkoku*. It's part of a sub-genre of a sub-genre; you might call it the time *non-travel* genre, or the "what if you *could* make time stand still?" fantasy. It's a story where characters freeze time, stopping all people, animal and objects in their tracks, and walking round what's suddenly become a world-sized diorama. The idea inspired a memorable sequence in Hosoda's *Girl Who Leapt Through Time*. For superheroes, it's how the alternate Quicksilvers see things in the *Avengers* and *X-Men* films. For a huge list of other examples, go to the *TV Tropes* site and look up "Time Stands Still."

Rather than a teen romcom or a super spectacle, *Kokkoku* is a crime thriller with paranormal add-ons. One of the most interesting things about it is its drably believable set-up, with a hint of what used to be called kitchen sink drama in Britain. We start with an unhappy Tokyo family. The closest thing it has to an authority figure is a cranky but formidable granddad (you could imagine him played in live-action by Takeshi Kitano). The other men in the family are dissolute and unemployed. One of the women is a struggling

single mum who doesn't know the paternity of her grade-school son.

No wonder that her sister – the main character – wants to bail on the family and find a new home as quickly as possible. She's 20-something Juri, currently trudging through endless job-hunting. We join her on one unremarkable afternoon, telling her grandpa that she's just failed her 19th interview. Her sister calls, asking her if she can pick up little Makoto, Juri's cute nephew, from school. Tired after her day, Juri goes to her older brother, Tsubasa, kills the RPG he's playing, and gets him to pick up Makoto instead. Shortly after he's gone, a stranger phones. Both Makoto and Tsubasa have been abducted, and the kidnappers are demanding five million yen in the next half hour.

FAMILY SECRETS

It's the grandfather (not named) who brings in the paranormal. As Juri and her dad Takafumi are desperately scrabbling up the money, the grandfather demands they shut up and sit down, ignoring the ticking clock. Taking a strange orange rock from a mantelpiece, he gets the others to touch it, then cuts his own hand and lets blood drip, as if making a pact. The world goes dark, and there are strange white jellyfish creatures floating through the air... creatures Juri remembers seeing before. The creatures burrow into the three humans, and the world snaps back into relief. But now time has frozen, and



"IT'S A STORY WHERE CHARACTERS FREEZE TIME AND WALK ROUND WHAT'S SUDDENLY BECOME A WORLD-SIZED DIORAMA."



Juri, her granddad and Takafumi are the only people moving in the world...

...Or so it seems for a short, er, time. When the trio go to save Makoto and Tsubasa, they find out fast that the kidnappers can *also* move in this frozen world; they know all about the family's power, and they're after far more than five million yen. Another complication; there are monsters in this frozen Tokyo, like moving trees, which can bash your skull in. And then there's *another* young woman, about Juri's age, with her own agenda, whom Juri has met before.

Based on an eight-volume manga that ran from 2009 to 2014, *Kokkoku* is reminiscent of *Gantz* – not so outrageous in sex and violence, but with similar images of characters running round a mundane, silent Tokyo. *Gantz*'s memorable Rip Slyme theme (the hip hop *Super Shooter*) is evoked in *Kokkoku*'s funky title song; it's performed by the singer-songwriter Miyavi, who also did the theme for Takashi Miike's

Blade of the Immortal. Beyond *Gantz*, *Kokkoku* echoes shows like *Ghost Hound* – frightened protagonists blundering through supernatural pocket realities – while the tree creatures suggest the mummies of the recent *Ajin*.

Like *Gantz*, one of the show's problems is while the situation is supposedly terrifying, the series is bad at maintaining tension; indeed, it's prone to slip into mild tedium. Not enough is made of the timeless world, apart from the obvious stuff; kids stopped on swings, fish paused mid-leap, hanging drops of water or blood.

Most of the enemies – with the exception of the mystery woman – feel so anonymous that it's easy to forget who's who, and their penchant for threatening women sexually will have some viewers switching off. But Juri learns to kick back satisfyingly, while remaining a grounded character with a compelling rapport with her old granddad. ●

ALSO STREAMING...



DARLING IN THE FRANXX

It had fans at "Studio Trigger does mecha." Actually, this is a studio two-hander, with the *Kill la Kill* studio teaming up with A-1 Pictures, which has its own mecha experience with *Aldnoah.Zero*. *Franxx*, though, goes all out to remind fans of a certain *other* mecha anime, what with future humanity being threatened by monsters, pressing youngsters to pilot robots, while the protagonist is a psychologically-troubled boy paired up with a brashly intimidating girl... Look, you know where we're going.



VIOLET EVERGARDEN

Another heavyweight studio, Kyoto Animation, presents this lushly drawn story set in an alternate-world Europe. Here, a female ex-soldier who's been through hell finds an unexpected purpose in peacetime, ghost-writing intimate letters for clients and giving her own feelings a workout. Based on light novels, it's scripted by Reiko Yoshida (*A Silent Voice*, *Lu Over the Wall*). *Violet Evergarden* is showing on Netflix in most territories, including Britain, but unfortunately not in the US.



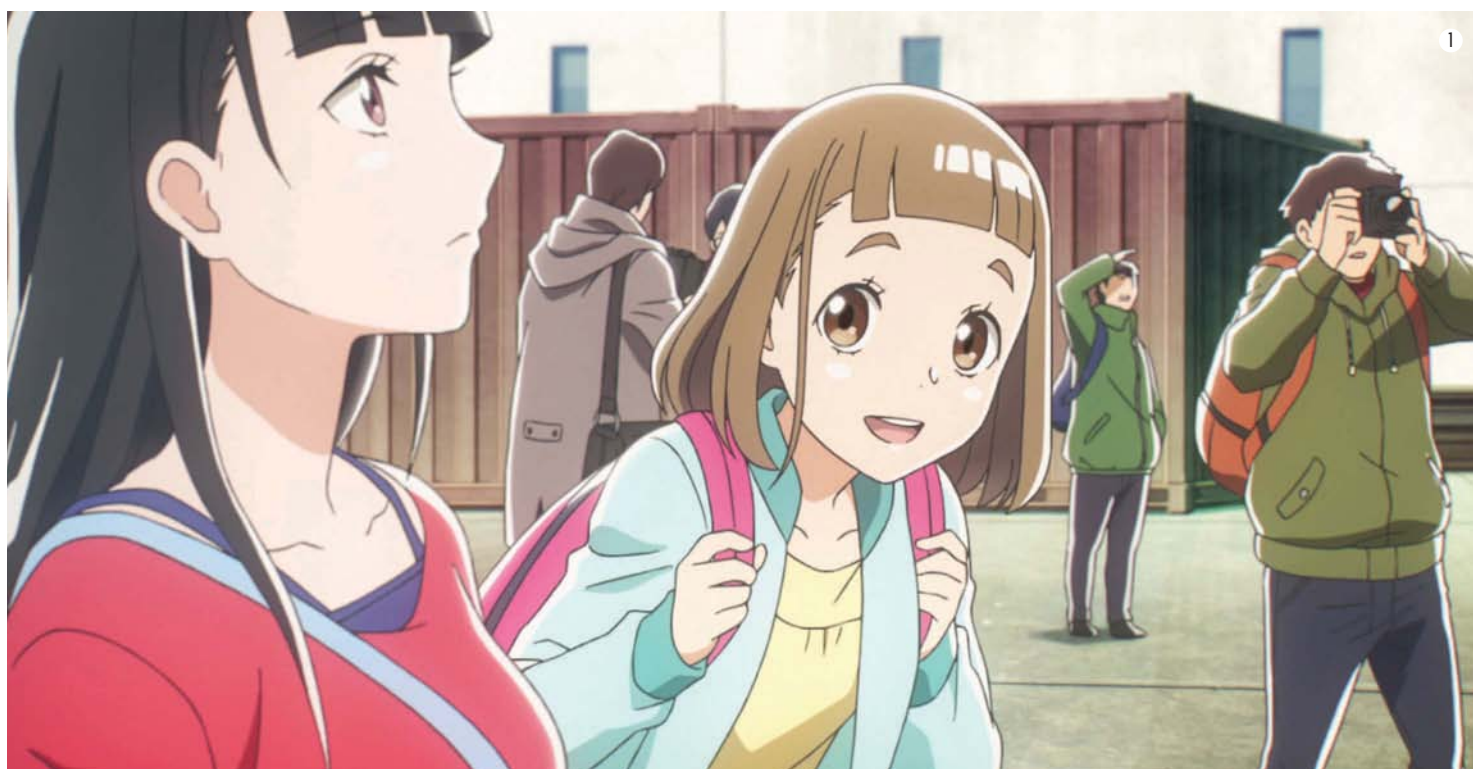
POP TEAM EPIC

Forget *Devilman Crybaby*. The show that's *really* reducing fans to gibbering wrecks is this, well, *thing*. It's a maddeningly random, annoying skit show about two schoolgirls who may have evolved from America's Ren and Stimpy. It may be a tragic mistake. It may be a torture test to find out if you're a *truly* hardcore otaku. Heck, it may be a terror attack. If you start to like it, it's probably too late to seek professional help.

ANIME EXPOSÉ

A PLACE FURTHER THAN THE UNIVERSE

Journey to the Bottom of the Earth



IMAGINE THIS STORY. A teenage boy with big dreams, but also deep insecurities, discovers that another boy at his school has an incredible ambition; to travel to Antarctica to look for his mother, who vanished on a research trip there. The boys become friends, vowing to reach the icy continent together. Defying the scorn of their classmates, and the seeming impossibility of their dream, they end up drawing more boys into their group, looking for any way to travel to the bottom of the world...

It's a story that could be told several ways; for example, as a vintage adventure tale in the style of Willard Price, or a *Goonies*-style adventure film from the 1980s, or even a "cute boy" anime from Kyoto Animation like *Free!* You can ponder these alternatives while watching *A Place Further From the Universe*, which tells the above story with a crucial difference; the characters are girls.

Mari is our viewpoint, a high-schooler worried that her teen years are slipping by, and who's determined to do something *different*. She tries to cut school and head out on an adventure, but chickens out at the station platform. Later she sees another girl, dashing for a train at the same station, and dropping an envelope stuffed with money. Luckily, this stranger goes to the same school, and Mari can return the money to her. So Mari befriends Shirase, nicknamed "Antarctica" by her classmates because of her crazy desire to go to that continent and find her mum.

Shirase's dream may seem impossible – after all, it's as far from Japan to Antarctica as it is from *Britain* to Antarctica (about 9,000 miles), and Polar

expeditions hardly cater to schoolkids. Still, an expedition is due to go there, and Shirase's determined to try anything. Then a couple more girls come on board, an opportunity *does* open up, and what seemed a fantasy journey turns into a genuine possibility. But still, is there really any way that Shirase can track down her mother at the ends of the Earth?

MORE THAN MOE

The series is animated by the venerable Madhouse studio and directed by a woman, Atsuko Ishizuka, who also helmed the *No Game No Life* franchise. It's certainly an unusual mix for anime; as of writing, we've seen nearly half the show and it's still extremely open-ended. (It's an original story, so there's no manga or light novel series to spoil it.) True, some things are clear. It's a story of friendship, and growing up, and sticking with impossible-seeming ambitions, but like *Antarctica*, the show doesn't signpost the way ahead.

It's possible to see the series in two opposite lights; either a gender-swapped boys' adventure, or as a cute girl anime with added story, but it promises something more. To take the second possibility first, the series *does* have cute girls, especially Mari with her enthusiasm, klutziness and puppy expressions. The other girls are pretty in conventional anime ways, though they're all less girly than Mari. Shirase departs herself like an awesomely collected, defiant young woman – at least she does much of the time. But she cries with hysterical gratitude in the first episode when Mari returns her money, and she has panicked moments (some very funny) when she's abruptly out of her depth. The comic scenes with the assembled girls, full of fast exclamations



Found Property

In the first episode, Shirase is distraught to realise she's lost the money she's been saving (a million yen, or around £6,500.) She might have reflected that at least she's in Japan, which is famous for the mountains of lost property recovered – there are endless accounts of mislaid wallets, laptops and other valuables being handed in by kind strangers. Not that that's an excuse for being careless with your valuables, of course, and you may need to pay a reward to the finder.

Cut Out

One quirk of *A Place Further than the Universe* is that its characters are outlined with stripes of white. Why the show chose this look isn't clear – perhaps it's just to stand out from the morass of TV anime. It does, though, mean the characters look unusually two-dimensional. The images are slightly evocative of vintage British TV cartoons with stop-motion cut-out characters, such as *Ivor the Engine* and the original *Paddington*, though *Place's* actual animation is in a straightforward “anime” style.

1. Mari and Shirase at the beginning of their friendship. 2. All the show's main characters (as of writing) together; from left to right, Shirase, Hinata, Yuzuki and Mari. 3. Time out in a karaoke booth!

and funny put-downs, often feel close to *K-On!* or *Kinmoza*.

Unlike those shows, though, the girls are all driven by Kirase's urgent purpose; to get to Antarctica. Moreover, we see the characters stressed and angry, and even in the early episodes it's emphasised that they're growing up. There's a particularly strong subplot involving a friend of Mari who's not part of the Antarctic adventure, and how this affects their relationship. It's certainly likely that this show is partly targeted at the *K-On!* fanbase, but it also seems designed as a crossover, to attract viewers who'd stay away from *moe* and cute girls doing cute things.

As for whether it's a boys' story with girls... Well, it's arguable that the basic story, of a youngster setting out on an epic journey, would have been once thought of as a boys' adventure, but that stereotype has eroded for decades. Actually, in the show's first half, there've been no substantial male characters at all, and the girls show no interest in boys (though that's often true in “cute girl” anime too). Once upon a time, it might have been thought necessary to make at least one of the girls a tomboy, but not here. In the first episode, Chirose is taunted by two mean girl types, but she stays composed and doesn't hit back; instead, Mari uses a ruse to get her new friend out of trouble. You can argue about if that's a feminine solution to a problem, or just a smart one. ●

LOCATION

The series starts in Gunma Prefecture, a mountainous area not too far from Tokyo by train (the characters go to central Tokyo in the second episode).



LONG HAUL

In anime, the archetypal “child on an epic journey” story is *3,000 Miles in Search of Mother*, also called *From the Apennines to the Andes* or just *Marco*, the name of the little boy hero. In the 1880s, Marco embarks on a perilous journey from Genoa in Italy across the world to Argentina. The anime was serialised for a year (52 episodes) in 1976, the director was future Ghibli co-founder Isao Takahata (*Princess Kaguya*). A cinema film remake followed in 1999.

HAIKYO: APPRECIATING ABANDONED ATTRACTIONS

Adam Miller ponders the legacy of deserted theme parks

IN 2016, THE Japan Times ran a callous article that called my beautiful adopted city of Nagoya the most boring place in Japan, which stung my soul like it was being flicked by an elastic band. Anyone who has spent time in Nagoya has heard these criticisms before. The city can come off as insular, conservative and dull; but to the well trained eye it is welcoming, awesome in its kookiness and vibrant in its own grey-concrete-jungle kind of way... Plus, we have the best chicken wings in the country (tebasaki) which is reason enough to stay in my book.

Because the rest of the nation is so quick to belittle Nagoya, residents take any chance they can get to sing its praises, so when LegoLand opened early last year, there was a buzz in the air and breaths were bated. However, within its first year, attendance was down, ticket prices were readjusted and the park was routinely closed on off-season Tuesdays and Wednesdays to save costs. The annual report paints a rose tinted picture, but in reality the future of the park seems less than secure.

THE LONG LIST OF FAILED AMUSEMENT PARKS

If LegoLand Japan does go the way of the dodo, it won't be the first case in the country. In fact there is such a plethora of abandoned spots in Japan that there is even a word for it – Haikyo. Keen photographers have explored these deserted wastelands, half overgrown with nature trying to reclaim the land – and legally, of course, this is trespassing and very naughty, even if the photography is really good.

So why are there so many vacant amusement parks? There are a number of reasons, but perhaps the most common is that they were built during the bubble economy, a period of financial growth in Japan that no-one realised wasn't sustainable. Before the bubble popped in the early 1990s, investors were looking for their next sure-fire hit, and amusement parks were just one such venture. But when the economy tanked and people had less disposable income, luxuries like rollercoasters and boats shaped like swans tended to lose out to feeding and clothing your children or paying utility bills. Here are just a few examples of overgrown and forgotten tourist traps, but just type in "Haikyo" into your search engine of choice and you'll find many more.

SPORTS WORLD IZUNAGAOKA: CLOSED 1996

A perfect example of a bubble investment popping is Sports World Izunagaoka, which was opened in 1988 and was a water park with

extravagant flumes and slides, hotel blocks, restaurants and stores. The resort lasted less than a decade before it closed its doors in 1996. The company behind this venture finally went bankrupt in 2010 and everything besides the parking lot and few dilapidated buildings were demolished. It is amazing how quickly this luxury resort was overrun by the local vegetation, and many a Haikyo enthusiast was disappointed when it was demolished.

ITALIA MURA – NAGOYA: CLOSED MAY 2008

Some parks close because they simply can't find an audience, maybe because they are too expensive, too dull, in a bad location or a mix of all three. One such attraction that was a perfect cocktail of these foibles was Italia Mura, a huge recreation of an Italian street that hugged the coast close to Nagoya Port. When I first landed in Japan nine years ago, it was already a collection of decorated husks, shops and restaurants with extravagant facades, closed to the world. It has since been knocked down, and I do kind of miss those deserted fake streets that looked like a film set that's only been partially constructed, with boarded up windows and skinny gondolas slowly rotting into the sea. By all accounts it was never really busy, starting slow and declining from there.

NARA DREAM LAND: CLOSED AUGUST 2006

Perhaps the biggest theme park to fail was Nara Dream Land, which was built in 1961. Although some might say it was influenced by Disneyland, others point out it was an outright rip-off, so when Tokyo Disneyland opened in 1983, attendance dropped as people flocked to the real deal. The opening of Tokyo Disney Sea in 2001 didn't help matters, and when Universal Studios opened just 40km away, guests stayed away in droves! After an impressive 45 year run, it closed in 2006, and remained vacant for over a decade. In 2015 a company called SK Housing bought the land from Nara prefecture for 730 million yen (around five million GBP) and the demolition crew have gradually been taking the park apart since October 2016. ●



"WHEN THE ECONOMY TANKED AND PEOPLE HAD LESS DISPOSABLE INCOME, LUXURIES LIKE ROLLERCOASTERS AND BOATS SHAPED LIKE SWANS TENDED TO LOSE OUT TO FEEDING AND CLOTHING YOUR CHILDREN..."



1. I don't think the buses at Dreamland are running any more. Photo by JP Haikyo / <http://bit.ly/2Eq0QgR>
2. Legoland Nagoya. Image by Zuiryo Taniguchi.
3. The boats are all gone-dola in Italia Mura.
4. Looking for customers in Legoland. Image by Steve Allen.
5. Italia Mura: is this tacky or classy?
6. Looks like Italia Mura's SanMarco is Sans Customers...

MANGA SCHOOL with Ruth Keattch

SPRING FLOWERS

IT'S SPRING AGAIN! WELL, IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE... BUT THIS HARSH WINTER COLD JUST ISN'T LETTING UP! SO HOW ABOUT WE GET ENTHUSED ABOUT SPRING BY LEARNING HOW TO DRAW FLOWERS? IT'LL KEEP OUR MINDS OFF THE COLD!

1. BASIC VISUALS

Firstly, let's start by visualising the flower – start with a circular shape to give you a rough boundary of your flower. Most flowers are circular in shape, but if you check some references you'll see that by changing a few minor details in petal shape, you can get a massive range of blossom types! Just sketch out your basic shape first so you can use it as a guide to draw in the details. Remember, as a rule, petals radiate outward evenly – this is why you need the circle to help you get the sizes right.

2. FROM THE SIDE

Now you've got the basics down, you can experiment and try moving and shifting the circle you start with. Changing the angle will enable you to draw flowers from many different angles! Here we've got a daisy, which has a relatively flat profile, and next to it a rose, with a much deeper set of petals. A tulip-type flower has less frills on the edges and fewer petals overall. To draw a sunflower, remember to make the centre part very wide, with smaller petals around the fringe! Have fun with experimenting with different shapes, and decide for yourself if you want to copy a real-life example or make your own flower from your imagination.

3. FLOWER GIRL TAKES SHAPE

Now you can draw flowers from different angles, let's try to put those flowers together into a composition! I've drawn a simple cute girl up first, and blocked out the areas for the flowers – notice how I've kept to the same circular shape to ensure that I'm not getting confused! Don't worry about which flower goes where yet, the most important part is to work out which flowers are in front or at the top, as they get drawn first.

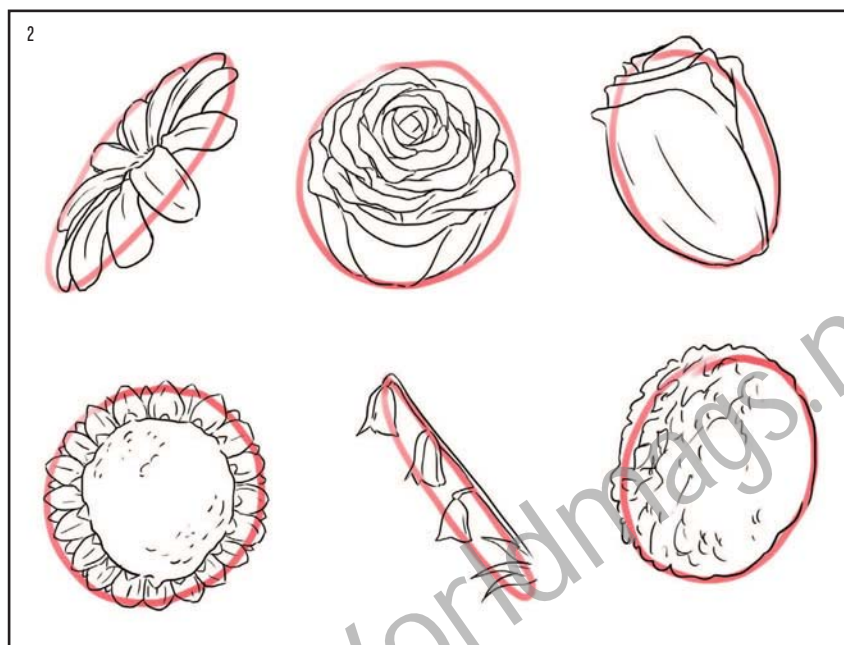
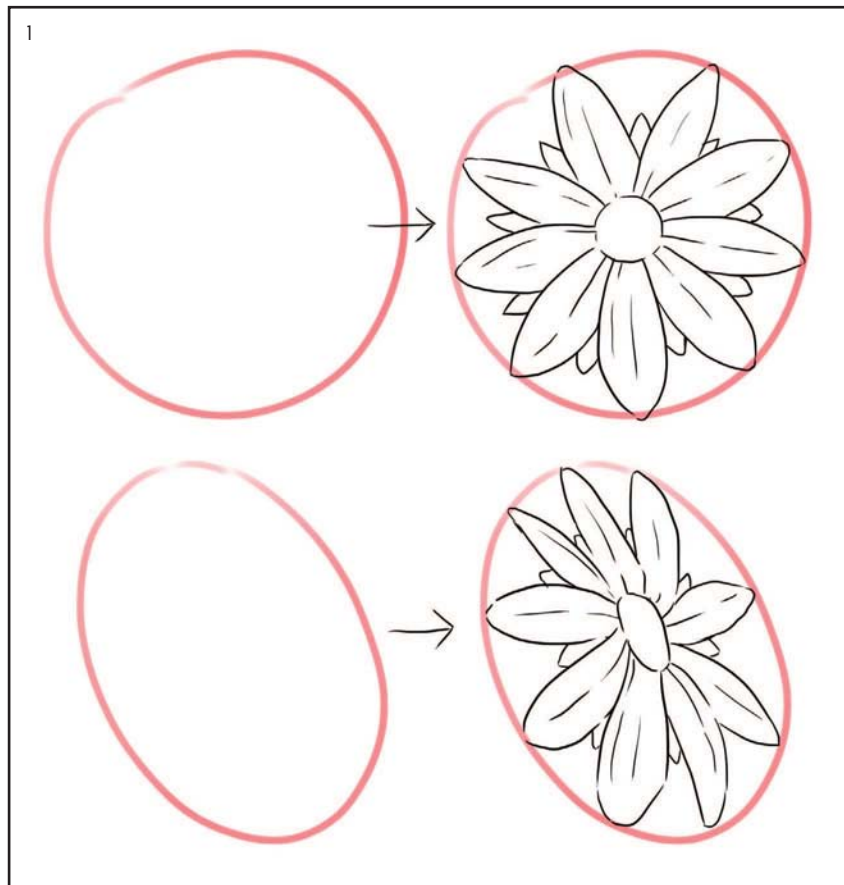
4. FILL IN THE GAPS

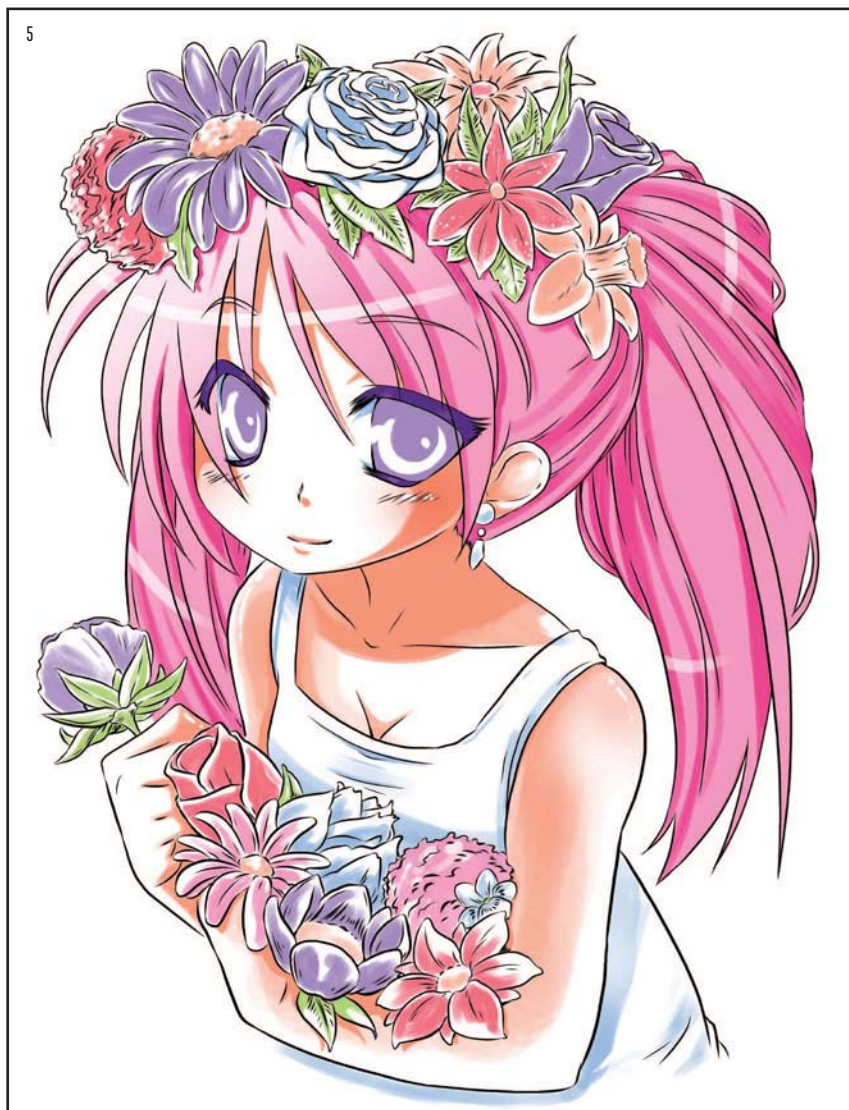
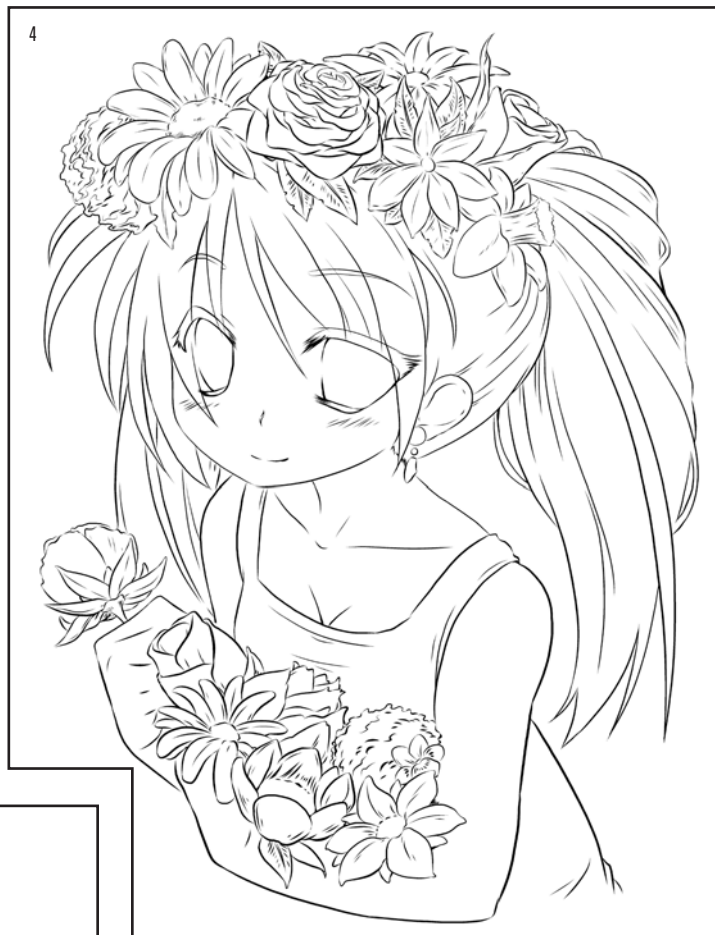
Now it's time to fill in your shapes! Depending on which flowers you select, your piece will end up with a different feel to it. Having all the flowers the same with the same colours looks more fashionable and chic, but having an eclectic mixture of different types is more of a challenge, and looks fun and demonstrates the bounty of nature! We're going for the latter option, so draw in your flowers, remembering to start from the front / top of each area, to give your piece logical perspective.

5. COLOUR YOUR COMPOSITION

And finally, don't forget that your flowers need to be nice and bright – pastels are the perfect colours to go for when giving your compositions a nice, warm spring feel to them! Summertime flowers would look great with balmy oranges and yellows, and for winter you could try dramatic reds and greens!

Hopefully your flowers will help brighten up this cold period of the year and usher in the real flowers!





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Chameleon Color Tones is an innovative marker system, where a single marker allows you to achieve multiple tones. Initially launching the highly acclaimed Deluxe Set, a pack of 20 markers allowing you to get over 100 tones, and the new palette of 30 new colours (50 in total) will leave artists with near endless possibilities.

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[ANIME REVIEW]

BLUE EXORCIST: KYOTO SAGA VOLUME 1

School's out

26 MARCH // MANGA ENTERTAINMENT // 15 // ACTION, ADVENTURE // £19.99 (DVD), £24.99 (BLU-RAY) // 150 MINS // 6 EPISODES

REPRISING ROLES

This release contains the English and Japanese soundtracks, with all the major *Blue Exorcist* actors returning in both languages. (Dub actor Bryce Papenbrook, who plays Eren in *Attack on Titan* and Kirito in *Sword Art Online*, is back as Rin.) The rest of the series will be released on 28 May.

PLOT Rin's classmates are thunderstruck to learn that he's the son of Satan! With terrible timing, a turncoat exorcist tries to steal a deadly magic artefact from Kyoto. The exorcists must defend the city, but can they ever pull together again?

We weren't expecting any more *Blue Exorcist* anime. There was no shortage of story material, courtesy of the manga by Kazue Kato, but the execs at A-1 Pictures seemed clear they weren't in for the long haul. The first *Blue Exorcist* anime ran in 2011, and followed the manga faithfully for a while. But it split from Kato's story in the later episodes and made up its own finale, with all-out war, Messiah superbombs and the world's fate hanging on a trick with mirrors. A movie followed at the end of 2012, and that seemed to be that.

And now, A-1 returns to Kato's manga to bring us this rather excellent follow-up. It's both a sequel and reboot, carrying on from part 15 of the first series, when Rin revealed

he was Satan's son to his shocked classmates. (It ignores all the later first season episodes, plus the film.)

Kyoto Saga is a delightful surprise, in a similar way to the second *Attack on Titan* season. With action-adventure franchises, there's always the risk they'll turn into self-imitations as they go on, with hollow battles and diminishing returns. Instead *Kyoto Saga* dares to change things up, shifting balances and inventing new things, to make *Exorcist*'s world feel bigger and more involving.

The obvious change is that *Kyoto Saga* doesn't have monsters / villains of the week. There are no more demon chefs or thuggish flowers. Instead, the 12-part series – this volume has the first six – is one big mission. There's a brand-new enemy who's done his homework, planted his pawns, and won't be beat in 20 minutes. He's a treacherous exorcist called Todo who looks kinda ordinary (whitening hair) and kinda nuts (bad boy big grin), like your scary uncle.

True, Todo's not a terribly memorable villain by anime standards, and yet you still feel he's a good one, with shades of Emperor Palpatine and even the older versions of the "Master" in *Doctor Who*. While Todo uses magic, he fights best by pressing people's buttons; people like Rin's hyper tense brother Yukio. Yukio seems an ultra-callous professional now, coldly telling one frantic mum in a hostage situation that, "You should prepare yourself for the worst". He seems *bound* to go postal soon.

After Todo's entrance, Rin and the other trainee exorcists go to Kyoto, to protect a dangerous artefact which Todo covets.



Then we get the second main plank of the series: suspicion and division. Most of Rin's class are still shell-shocked by the revelation that he's a demon, wielding the same Satanic fire which killed umpteen exorcists 16 years ago (the Blue Night disaster). To bring in another magic-school saga, it's as if Harry Potter turned out to be Voldemort's son.

Cue a lot of grim-looking teenagers shouting in Rin's face, especially the rooster-haired Ryuji who'll be central in this story. But this isn't an adolescent-angst series, because Rin's in it. He's still the *shonen* action hero; brash, confident, ever the crazy optimist, though he'll be executed if he loses control of his fire again. It's like Rin's reading from a different anime script from everyone else. It's hard to feel gloomy when he's training scrappily on the rooftops, scattering blue flames like sweet-wrappers and calling his teacher Shura "Boobzilla!"

"IT'S AS IF HARRY POTTER HAD TURNED OUT TO BE VOLDEMORT'S SON."

There are domestic details to enjoy, as we meet Ryuji's parents – a ladylike mum who clobbers her son for dying his hair, and a barmy old priest dad who *might* be much more. (Tellingly, the dad reminds Rin of his late human father, Shiro.) Their base is a mix of family home, where multiple families work together, and a fortress, with the show's Evil Artefact guarded in an underground temple. The

backgrounds feel strongly Japanese, but the new characters – the deceptively barmy father figure, the regiments of magic fighters in Asian garb – recall an imitator of anime, the American cartoon *The Last Airbender*.

A big complaint is that this volume has very little action by *Blue Exorcist* standards. There's an intense sense of conflict between the characters, with some terrific furious face-offs, but there's little magic-wielding until the end of the volume. Instead, there's a lot of plot, including a whodunit and an extended flashback. As in the recent *Titan* series, the familiar 'old' characters are sometimes marginalised in favour of the new ones, though there's a return appearance from an old friend.

The script asks you to pay more attention than you would if you were watching an episodic series. Some of the new characters and their relationships could have been laid out better, meaning that you can spend a while sorting out who everyone is (with the help of our character guide on page 010.) These are boy-heavy episodes, and fans of Shiemi and Izono may feel short-changed, though the odd couple have good moments together.

But it's still very well done, full of integrated plotting and interesting characterisation in a world that's palpably growing. With nary a whiff of filler, this *Exorcist* improves on the original in many ways.

More plot and less action, but this is still an excellent return for Rin. ●

★★★★☆

CANON CONFUSION

Some sources claim *Kyoto Saga* carries on from part 17 of the first season, but that only works if you ignore the "uncanonical" scenes in parts 16 and 17, which is too messy for us! There may be similar continuity headaches when the *Tokyo Ghoul: re* anime starts on Japanese TV this April...

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涙のドラマチック・ラブ!!
クールな大人の恋に疲れた私だが...

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せがわ真子

「わたしの守護天使」

清水康代

小牧成

「絶品猫マンガ!!」

田辺ヒカリ「にゃんズ」

表紙イラスト／岡田理知

「夢の果て」
関谷青子

「わたしの守護天使」

清水康代

小牧成

「絶品猫マンガ!!」

田辺ヒカリ「にゃんズ」

表紙イラスト／岡田理知

母が化粧をしなくなった理由とは!?

上田愛子

「マイ・ドレッサー」

凍りついた私の心を溶かしてくれた人...

そねはらすみこ

「幸福への招待状」

「感動の4号連続掲載!!」
まさき輝

「Big Wind」

恋多き女優が本気で愛した男とは...
若林美樹

「シスターズ」

生徒の自殺未遂を知り揺れる思い...
福田素子

「いつちゃんの保健室」

笑顔の明日を信じて...
感動夜



RETIREMENT PLANS

What's the appeal of the mature lady market in Japan? It's probably got something to do with the fact that Japanese women have an average life expectancy of nearly 87 years. Compare to a mere 80 for Japanese men, and a 81 for the average Brit. But can they still read the pages...?

MANGA SNAPSHOT

SAKURA LOVE STORY

Jonathan Clements makes a drama out of a crisis

ISSUE #c.228 // DEBUT YEAR: 2008 (1989) // PAGE COUNT: C.500 // PUBLISHER: MEDIAX // PRICE: 670 YEN (£4.32) // CYCLE: MEDIAX

“MORE TEARS,” PROCLAIMS the cover line. “Even more emotion, and always dramatic!” Speaking as the man whose significant other recently got on a train to the airport without passport, ticket or wallet, that’s the very last thing I need in my life right now, but the MediAx corporation isn’t selling *Sakura Love Story* (1) to me. Who are they it selling to...?

Our cover lady has silvery hair that might be some sort of atomic blonde, but could also be just plain grey. She is ageless – your guess is as good as mine, but it could be anything between 25 and 60, and that is at least part of the artistic point. Probably takes a lot of Shiseido and Innisfree, but there’s a mystery in itself. She’s clutching a dog that either looks smug or satanic, depending on where you stand on such things, and a man in an inadvisably green sweater is waving around an unidentified rectangle that... wait for it... I think is supposed to be a cell phone. Regular readers of this column will know that it often outs reprint anthologies through their depiction of outmoded communications technology – by sticking an iPhone on the cover, *Sakura Love Story* is defiantly proclaiming it is up-to-date and down with the kidz.

If *Sakura Love Story* really wants drama, it should look in the mirror, since it’s been the subject of torrid break-ups and spangly make-overs throughout its life. Starting out as *Lady’s Comic Sakura* in 1989 at the height of the Bubble economic boom that valorised and pandered to female consumers, it was renamed just plain *Sakura* in 1992. Its original publisher, Schola, struggled and folded at the end of the decade, but not before *Sakura* was rescued by the prince charming of Aoba Publishing in 1989. Happily ever after...? No! Because Aoba itself went bankrupt in 2007, only for its unhappy ward *Sakura*, entirely blameless and innocent, to be rescued once again by the handsome knight MediAx in 2007.

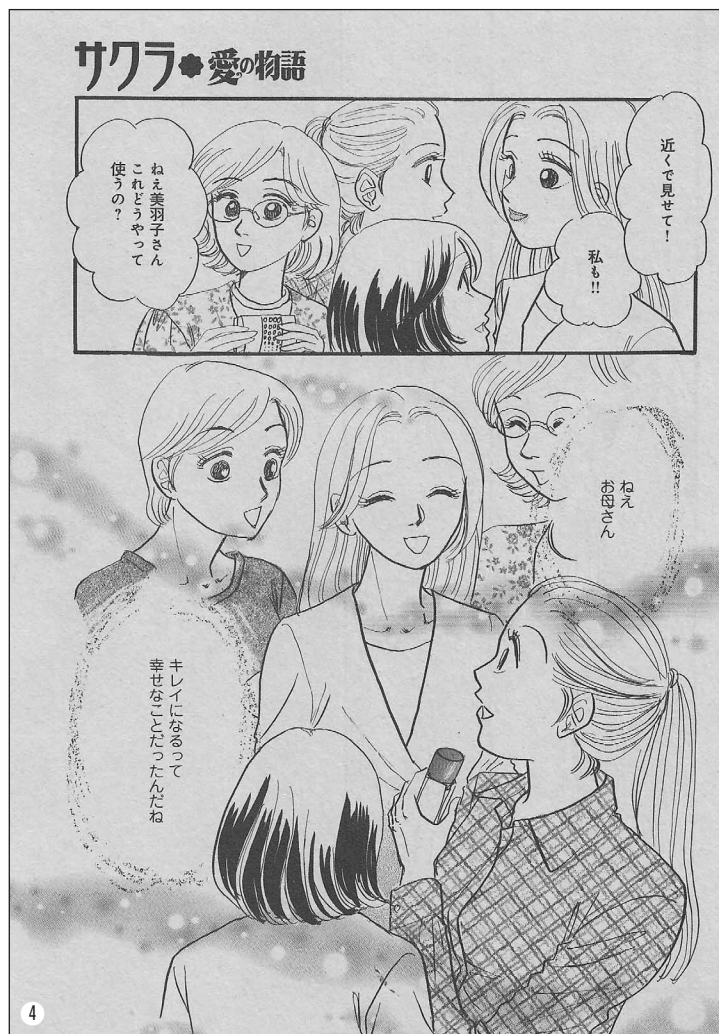
In 2008, MediAx changed the title to *Sakura Love Story* – seems a bit domineering and presumptuous of him, if you ask me – but then again, MediAx was kind of an absentee landlord, not dealing with *Sakura* on a daily basis. *Sakura* itself is actually prepared for its regular outings by an entirely different company – I like to think of Kanon-Creative as a committee of talking animals and friendly, animated furniture working for a brisk but efficient fairy godmother, preparing *Sakura* each month for her trip to the ball, but

that would probably be a step too far in this analogy. Kanon-Creative is in fact a one-stop editorial services and digital content provider with a Shinjuku postal address, active in the manga market since 2005 packaging several manga magazines for their nominal publishers, including *This Mystery is Interesting* (NEO 121) and *15 Love Stories* (NEO 127).

Reading between the lines, when Aoba folded in 2007, all it owned was the *Sakura* name. Hence the ease of the takeover, with Kanon-Creative soldiering on with its monthly deliveries undeterred, albeit with a different signature on the cheques, and a different logo on the spine. Plainly there are people in publishing who are ever prepared to fund *Sakura*, because it has some sort of blue-chip readership. More invested media thinkers might like to ponder what exactly the “publisher” of the magazine actually does, since practically every element of its initiation seems to be outsourced.

This, at least, explains why the magazine seems to have a stable of regular artists, whose names are more prominent on the cover than their one-shot stories inside. Miwa Tachiki’s manga in this issue is *Start Line* (2), the tale of a go-getting lady who is traumatised by her mother’s sudden illness and death. Miki is a keen amateur athlete and home-maker, whose textbook-perfect life seems to suddenly unravel. Her husband is drinking too much, her son is morose and withdrawn, and then she gets dragged over the coals for ordering a pair of expensive running shoes when times are tight. Although there are some narrative musings playing out in Miki’s head as she runs – the loneliness of the medium-distance runner, if you like – Tachiki never quite editorialises the overt message, which is that a lot of these problems were already bubbling up before granny’s death threw them into sharp focus. Miki is now standing at the start of a new, symbolic race, to get her family back into shape and to deal with any new problems as they arise. Life isn’t perfect, but she shouldn’t give up what she loves out of spite or depression. The athletic metaphor just about holds for the story’s short length, and both her husband and son are waiting for her at the finishing line as she completes her next half-marathon.

The underlying theme of this manga anthology is women overcoming a crisis. That’s certainly the tone of Richi Okada’s *Even Weeping* (3), which has the murky opening spreads >>>



CAT PEOPLE

It wouldn't be a lady's manga without cats, and sure enough, the supposedly endearing antics of Hikari Watanabe's *Nyanz* just sneak in before the last page. Here's a manga artist who has presumably made owning four kittens a tax-deductible expense, because she writes incessantly about everything they do.

>>> that mark it out as a reprint that previously ran in partial colour in another magazine. Caught you, *Sakura*! Or have I, because the cover makes no promise of "original" works, only of "one-shot masterpieces"?

Miss Tanigawa is a section chief in a Tokyo company, who has a reputation for being an ice-cold businesswoman. In fact, she is conducting a torrid office affair with one of her underlings, but confesses to the reader even as we start that "her heart is tired of cold, adult romance." She thinks this to herself in a movie theatre, but she isn't really talking about film onscreen. Instead, she has developed a carapace of cynicism about the media's promises of a fairy-tale ending for everybody. The word she uses is *koi*, which also translates as love, but has always been raunchier and more passionate than *ai*, the word for love used in the magazine's title. Okada does not shirk from the passion, uncompromisingly showing Miss Tanigawa in fierce, naked clinches with toyboy Mr Fujii, but the fact that not even the panels can address them by their first names makes it clear how anonymous and frankly dispassionate their relationship is.

Miss Tanigawa, as we eventually discover, is suffering from exhaustion and depression. Okada's manga starts to skate on thin ice – is she going to tell us that Miss Tanigawa can't have it all; that she is doomed to be a hysterical spinster; that she's missed the happy bus? Smartly, Okada doesn't push such a message, instead suggesting that what Miss Tanigawa really needs is for Mr Fujii to make a real commitment to her. There's no room in this story to comment on what kind of commitment that should be, or even for how long, but maybe he could start by calling her by her true name, Hanako. This is the sort of story that Japanese can do so well, because

"IT SEEMS THAT *SAKURA LOVE STORY* REALLY IS A MAGAZINE THAT EXPECTS ITS TYPICAL READER TO BE THE SAME WOMAN WHO BOUGHT IT WHEN IT STARTED, BACK IN THE HEADY DAYS OF THE LATE 20TH CENTURY."

Anglophone culture largely lacks the walls of politesse that can shut so many Japanese social interactions into guarded stand-offs.

ONE FOOT IN THE GRAVE?

Has *Sakura Love Story* attracted any new readers in the last 30 years, or is it now appealing to its original buyers, now in their 50s and older? The adverts certainly think that the readership needs to know about all the latest poultices and potions to spice up a fading sex life, as well as a bunch of invasive beauty treatments, including Botox and skin peels. Such marketing encourages us to look upon the cover image in a new light – this is a lady who's still got it, when "it" is shorthand for the attention of handsome young men who find her (giggle!) photo-worthy. You'll still find millions



of younger women online today who feel the same way, but it still seems strangely unreconstructed in a 2018 dominated by #MeToo and third-wave feminism.

That's the great thing about manga, the more impressionistic the art is, the less likely it is to have the space to include any wrinkles. *My Dresser* (4), by Aiko Ueda is all about beauty products – all those creams and lotions, wound filler and, I don't know, sandpaper, that women use to keep up appearances, and the sense in our heroine that she needs extra schooling to stay ahead of the cosmetics game. Her "dresser" is hence revealed as a double-meaning – it is both the bedroom table at which she puts on her make-up, and the chirpy beautician who becomes a mentor in matters of make-up. Blusher, mascara, foundation, base (apparently those aren't the same thing), and all sorts of lippy – it's a minefield. Miss Miyashita helps a lady dispel some freckles that are apparently unsightly, and then returns to her family with an odd homily, that while she enjoys making others feel beautiful, the love of her spouse and child is enough to do it for her. Probably not something she should advertise at the make-up counter... and an oddly contradictory ending for a manga that has plainly been shilling for BB mineral cream all the while, with some very obvious product placement.

Miki Wakabayashi's *Sisters* (5) is the third and last part of a series in which three terrifyingly sharp-featured women apparently try to enjoy life. Shizuo is the world-weary 40-something novelist with a permanent fag on, mourning the recent death of her father in the company of her two younger sisters, a scowling housewife and a bespectacled girl who only apparently needs to have glasses to have a character. But Wakabayashi is pulling a fast one, at least in this chapter, which is all about Shizuo. Hers is the narrative voice, and hers is the story

that she personally finds the most interesting – the pressures of rushing from a memorial service to a book launch, and the shock of digging into the life her father left behind. Her conclusion, delivered with a whimsical sigh over café coffee, is that her father toiled silently to make the sisters' world a better place, but the discovery and its importance are all hers. The other two might as well be sock puppets for all the difference they make – one wonders why it was called *Sisters* at all, when plainly, either by omission or design, the story is framed entirely through the perspective of just one.

It seems that *Sakura Love Story* really is a magazine that expects its typical reader to be the same woman who bought it when it started, back in the heady days of the late 20th century. Today, she has become an elegant 50-something, perhaps with an empty nest, perhaps with pampered pets, quite possibly driven and a little bit self-centred, facing predictable but still troubling mid-life crises like surly teen children, parental illness or a growing sense of her own mortality. But its message remains the same can-do gumption that characterised the office-lady manga of old – to paste on a smile and soldier through it, never losing sight of the fact she has weathered much worse than this, and what really matters is that she remains true to herself. ●

MANGA MAKE-UP

You'd be forgiven for thinking that *My Dresser* was a pilot for an ongoing series, but manga and make-up don't often seem to mix. One suspects that there is some sense that despite the manga's potential for nerdy Science Parts and Cinderella transformations, there is still something naff about using cartoon characters to give serious make-up advice. I'm ready to be proved wrong – write in if you know differently.



KITCHEN MASTER

Here's another crisis, solved by artist Yasuyo Shimizu. What do you do when guests arrive and there's almost nothing in the fridge? Thank God for *Kitchen Master*'s manga recipe this issue for anchovy and potato salad. And, one hopes, breath mints.



THE TITANS RETURN

The human-hungry engines of carnage are back and more lethal than ever. NEO's David West gets the lowdown from Hisashi Koinuma to learn all about the perils of the Danger Zone, why fans demanded tougher Titans, and what Hajime Isayama thinks about the upcoming A.O.T.2.

THEY'RE GIANT, TOWERING monstrosities of terror. Their hunger seems insatiable and their motives remain agonisingly unfathomable. They're the Titans and they're coming for mankind, breaking through the defences of Wall Maria and Wall Rose, heading straight for the heart of humanity's last refuge. All that stands in their way are the brave members of the Survey Corps and the Scout Regiment.

Armed with their Omni-Directional Mobility Gear, the Scouts fearlessly launch themselves at their gigantic foes, hoping to stem their ghastly onslaught even as they grapple with the mystery behind the source of their assailants. Following in the blood splattered, over-sized footsteps of 2016's *A.O.T. Wings Of Freedom*, Koei Tecmo are poised to unleash the pulse-pounding sequel as *A.O.T.2* stomps relentlessly towards our consoles. To get all the juiciest details on the new game, NEO turned to Hisashi Koinuma, President and COO of Koei Tecmo Games, to give us the skinny on what they're planning.

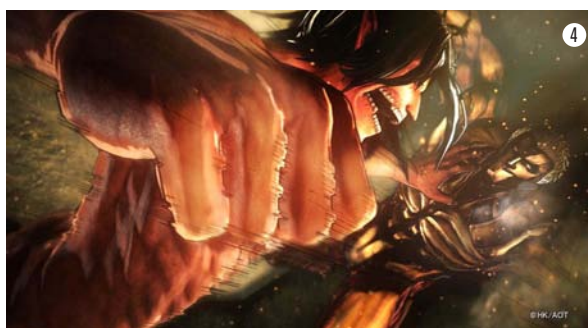
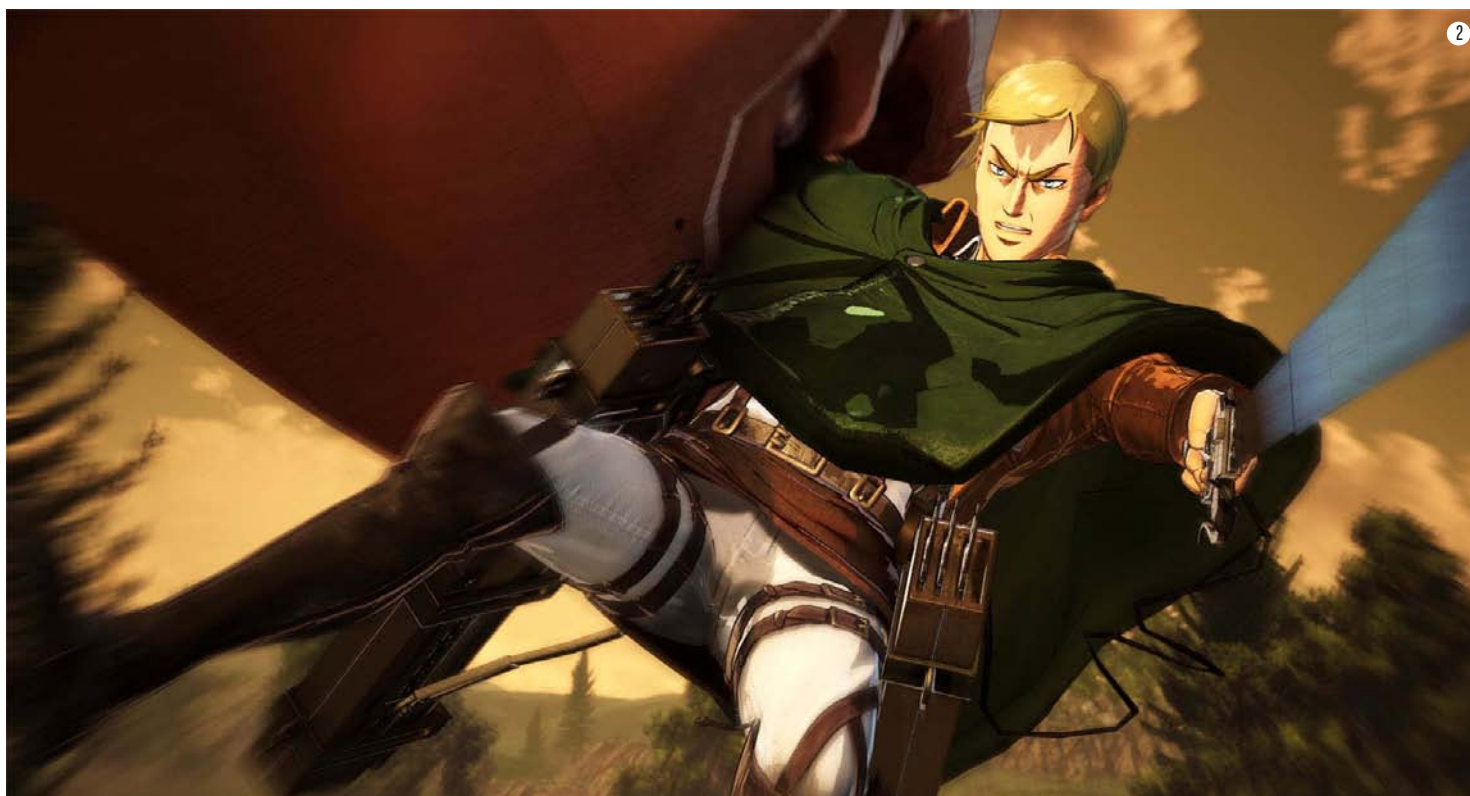
Where *A.O.T. Wings Of Freedom* followed the events portrayed in the first season of the anime, *A.O.T.2* picks up the tale at the start of the second season. But there's more to the new game than just an up-to-date storyline. One of the main developments has come as a result of feedback from fans of the first game who wanted the Titans to be more dangerous and less predictable. Apparently some people are just gluttons for punishment.

"It was the strength of the Titans being driven away," says Koinuma. "In the previous game, we received positive feedback about the omni-directional mobility and how exhilarating and enjoyable it was to use, but we also received feedback that once the player becomes comfortable with using it the player becomes too strong and the action feels monotonous. We think that a key reason behind this was that for the enemy Titans, their movement variations and algorithms were lacking, so we focused our attention on the behaviour of the Titans."

Japanese video game developers Omega Force return to the land of Titans after working on the first game, although perhaps they are best known for the *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*-inspired *Dynasty Warriors* franchise and their *One Piece: Pirate Warriors* series. Koinuma worked with Omega Force's Hideo Suzuki for *A.O.T.2* with Suzuki serving as the game's director.

"Normally the producer attends overseas events and interviews alone, but this time the director attended as well, so the producer would explicitly state what he is thinking in order to actively have a shared vision for the project," says Koinuma when asked how he worked with Suzuki on the title.

"To add to that, at the start of development with the director at the helm, the entire team focused on powering up the actions of the human characters, and the key direction of 'strengthening the movement and algorithms of the Titans' ended up being set aside. By having the producer strongly present



1. Titan tattoo removal can be a messy business. No Regrets.
2. That awkward moment when a nibble turns nasty. 3. Open wide and say, "Ahhhhh!!!! Sweet mercy, NOOOOOO!!!" 4. Punching the Armoured Titan seems like a shortcut to busted knuckles.

The Buddy System

Everyone needs a friend and in *A.O.T.2* the newly introduced Buddy Actions feature allows players to call upon their comrades for help, including calling for someone to come rushing to your rescue if you happen to fall into a Titan's clutches and face the unhappy prospect of being devoured imminently.

and his vision of strengthening the Titans, the entire project team was able to proceed in the right direction, so we felt the importance of sharing, in particular, the vision of the project."

GIANT SLAYERS

As you strap on your Omni-Directional Mobility Gear, it's all too easy to feel the sweat forming on your palms and the fingers of cold dread tickling the nape of your neck, particularly now that Koinuma and the team have made the titans deadlier than before. But take heart. *A.O.T.2* introduces fresh methods to take out your towering foes too.

"By adding a variety of new elements, the battle system has greatly evolved from the previous game," says Koinuma. "Examples are sneak attacks, where players can sneak up on the Titans; buddy actions, where team members' specific traits can be triggered; a restraining gun, used to capture Titans; and hook drives, which are powerful counter attacks.

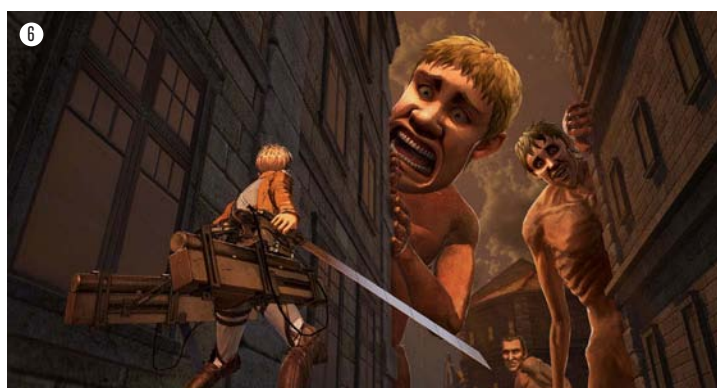
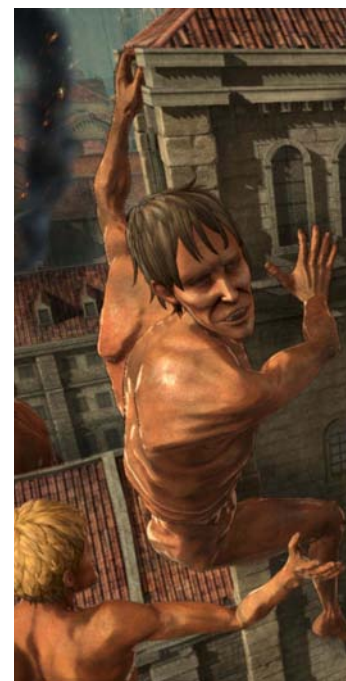
"These new elements have vastly improved the degree of freedom players have with in-game action. The opposing Titans' actions and AI has also been greatly strengthened, so players will be able to greatly enjoy the battles against the Titans in this game," he added.

One particularly frightening development is the new Danger Zone feature, which is what happens when an unlucky player attracts the attention of a nearby Titan, triggering an attack. No longer will the Titans vacantly lumber around, but once they've spotted you, they'll come charging in for the kill.

"We've implemented a detection system for the Titans," explains Koinuma. "There is a caution gauge which indicates how aware the Titans are of the player's presence, and the level will increase or decrease depending on the players' actions; the fuller the gauge, the higher the threat of being detected by the Titans. When the caution gauge is full, it will trigger a Danger Zone. While the Danger Zone is active, Titans will be able to perform highly powerful attacks, forcing the player into a desperate situation. Overcoming the Danger Zone is the key to victory!"

It's just another way in which the team behind the game hope to capture the nail-biting, stomach-churning intensity of the series as the all-too vulnerable humans face the greatest challenge to their very existence. "As previously mentioned, we think how the Titans are portrayed in the game is vital, so we were very thorough and particular in how the Titans are presented," says Koinuma. "In addition, we also put a great deal of energy into the depiction of the destruction of buildings and bloodshed, to give a greater sense of feeling as if you are on the battlefield."

In the series some Titans are merely petrifying, while others are incredibly tough, particularly the Armoured Titan which is nigh invulnerable, but Koinuma says they've taken steps to make sure the gameplay won't be so hard as to put people off. "We've given it quite a challenging difficulty level, but it is not set up to cause unreasonable stress," he says. "The Armoured Titan, who was invincible in the anime, has a weak point in the game, so we hope players will figure out how to defeat it." >>>



“AS PREVIOUSLY MENTIONED, WE THINK HOW THE TITANS ARE PORTRAYED IN THE GAME IS VITAL, SO WE WERE VERY THOROUGH AND PARTICULAR IN HOW THE TITANS ARE PRESENTED.” HISASHI KOINUMA

A Base To Call Your Own

Building bases is vital to halting the Titans in their tracks. The different types of bases include artillery bases that will blast Titans with cannon fire, supply bases where you can re-stock vital gas canisters and blades, and a bombing base which can detonate to deal damage to nearby Titans.

>>> BUILD A SCOUT

A.O.T. *Wings Of Freedom* featured ten playable characters, but A.O.T.2 opens up the cast right up to include more members. Now, alongside key story protagonists like Eren, Mikasa and Armin, the roster of playable characters will include Reiner, Bertholdt, Annie, Ymir, Hannes, and Keith Sadies, the instructor who gave Eren such a hard time during training in the 104th Cadet Corps.

In total 37 playable characters have been announced to date, as well as five different Titans for maximum collateral damage – Eren in his irate Titan form, the virtually indestructible Armoured Titan, the 60 metres of the imposing Colossal Titan, the combat savvy Female Titan from season one, and Ymir’s agile, toothsome Titan form.

But that’s not all. As mentioned, the plot of the game follows the events of the anime’s second season, but one of the biggest developments from A.O.T. *Wings Of Freedom* is the introduction of the ability to create your own Custom Scout, rather than always having to play as one of the series’ existing cast.

“The game’s story basically follows the narrative of the comics, but since the story is being shown from the eyes of an original protagonist, players can enjoy the story unfolding in a

different fashion from the comics. And while it doesn’t branch off from the main story, there is an original storyline featuring the characters from the comics,” says Koinuma.

“We wanted to show the story and world of *Attack On Titan* from a different angle than seen in the manga. Another major reason is that by having an original protagonist (Custom Scout), we would be able to show close interactions with the characters from the original comics. From this, we were able to portray the hidden and deeper sides of the series’ characters that we couldn’t depict in the previous game.”

Your very own, unique Custom Scout can explore the world within the walls that protect mankind, meeting and mingling with characters from the series as part of the Town Life feature. In this mode, building up friendships isn’t just the neighbourly thing to do, it even comes with its own rewards.

“The relationships do not directly affect how the game unfolds, because we didn’t want the Town Life part to feel like mandatory gameplay,” says Koinuma. “But, by playing the Town Life portion of the game, we have included devices that will make the game much more enjoyable to play.

“For example, an original storyline with characters from the manga unfolds, new skills can be learned, and how the



5. Mikasa can be so kawaii when she's not slicing up Titans. 6. I think they've spotted me. 7. Sometimes discretion is the better part of valour. 8. Another Titanic tussle coming up. 9. You can customise the colour of your uniform in *A.O.T.2*. Red is good for hiding bloodstains. 10. Sasha suddenly finds she has lost her appetite.



other characters call out to the main character during battle [changes].”

Your Scout can present characters with gifts, or attend lectures, improve their Omni-Directional Mobility Gear skills through training, hone their combat abilities, or even aid in the research and development of new, improved equipment. “We have enriched parts of gameplay outside of battle such as character growth, developing weapons, and collecting materials,” explains Koinuma about the RPG elements of the game.

Players can help capture Titans to serve as oversized guinea pigs in the Titan Research Room where you can learn more about each one’s strengths and weaknesses. In the words of Sun Tzu and *Rage Against The Machine*, know your enemy. It could be the difference between life and death.

ANNIHILATION ON THE AGENDA

A.O.T.2 introduces online options including Annihilation Mode. This is a competitive form of gameplay wherein teams of players compete to take down Titans as quickly as possible.

“Annihilation Mode is a team battle mode of up to 4 vs 4 players,” says Koinuma. “Players can gain points by defeating the devastating Titans and setting up bases, and the team with the highest score wins. Various powerful enemies, such as the Female Titan and Beast Titan, can be defeated for a lot of points, so we recommend working together with your teammates to defeat these powerful Titans.”

You can earn extra points through coordinating your team to attack a Titan’s limbs and destroying each body part before moving in for the finish. And to make each match as competitive as possible, as the time limit runs out, you can earn double points in a last-minute dash to secure that winning score.

Story Mode and Scout Missions both allow players to team up with

other gamers for online co-op play. So if you’re struggling to take out the most powerful Titans all by your lonesome self, you can join forces with a group of allies to pool your strength. Likewise, the pace of Research and Development can be increased through working with another player online to help unlock the very latest in Titan-fighting technology.

THE SEAL OF APPROVAL

As the game is poised for release, Koinuma knows that fans will demand an experience that outstrips what came before. “Since it is the second game of a popular IP, having to make it better than the first game was definitely a big challenge,” he says, “but the biggest challenge is developing the game for a worldwide simultaneous release on multiple platforms, for the many fans around the world who love *Attack On Titan*. We did what we can to meet the platform and language needs of the audience. I hope that everyone around the world will enjoy the game at the same time.”

There can surely be no greater seal of approval for *A.O.T.2* than having the blessing of the series’ creator, Hajime Isayama himself. It turns out that he’s already taken the title out for a test spin. “Isayama-sensei has played the game,” confirms Koinuma, “and he complimented us on the modelling and facial expressions of the characters from the manga, and the different and exhilarating omni-directional mobility action.


“In particular he seemed to like the character creation studio and he created an original character. If there is the chance, we might be able to see Isayama-sensei’s original character someday!” Now wouldn’t that be some cool DLC?

Take the battle to the Titans and join the fight to secure humanity’s very future when *A.O.T.2* comes out for the PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch and PC on 20 March from Koei Tecmo. ●

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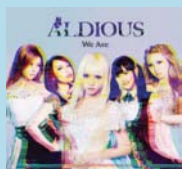
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IN THE FAMILY

Aldious' drummer Marina is the stepdaughter of American drumming legend Terry Bozzio, who has played with the likes of Frank Zappa, Jeff Beck and Korn.

[MUSIC REVIEW]

ALDIOUS – WE ARE

From metal to pop and back again

OUT NOW // JPU RECORDS // METAL // £11.99 (CD) // 288 MINS // 13 TRACKS

SOUND Eight years on from launching the Girls Metal Band Boom in Japan with their debut album *Deep Exceed*, Aldious keep the riffs flowing with their seventh studio record. *We Are* features eight new tracks and four bonus live cuts from the Osaka pop / power metal princesses.

Despite their importance in the explosion of Japan's current wave of all-female metal bands, Aldious cover a wide range musically speaking. *We Are* has plenty of power metal in tunes like *Persevere*, *Absolute* and the title track, but *Never Give Up* is essentially a pop song with added guitars. Frontwoman Re:NO has a sweet voice but she's not a belter,

which is usually a prerequisite for metal singers, and her voice can sound thin when she employs her upper register on *Koko ni Iru Fuzai*. *Kanashii Otoko* is another poppy track which lacks bite, while *Happy Birthday* is a saccharine acoustic ballad where Re:NO's tremulous delivery seems most at home. The four live recordings span their career, with the oldest track *Luft* coming from *Deep Exceed*, the twin guitar harmonies a reminder of their power metal credentials. *Sweet Temptation*, from 2015's *Radiant A*, boasts the heaviest, crunchiest riff here, *Die For You* is giddily catchy, and *Yozakura* romps merrily home.

They're not going to be mistaken for Slipknot anytime soon, but Aldious' pop sensibility and love for big ballads comes from the X Japan school of rock. Diehard metalheads may struggle with this disparity but it's integral to their style. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY DAVID WEST



TRIVIA

Guitarist and lyricist Miku Kobato worked in one of Tokyo's maid cafés before forming BAND-MAID. They released their debut mini-album, *Maid In Japan*, in January 2014.

[MUSIC REVIEW]



BAND-MAID – WORLD DOMINATION

OUT NOW // JPU RECORDS // HARD ROCK // £11.99 (CD) // 15 TRACKS

SOUND The prolific J-rockers return with their sights set on total global conquest. On their third full-length album, plus two mini-albums to their credit, the Tokyo quintet have honed their sound and songwriting down to a fine art. Don't let the frilly costumes put you off; these maids pack a wallop.

World Domination is one of those albums that fairly jumps out of the speakers at the listener. Miku Kobato and her squad unload riff after riff in a record jammed with catchy hooks, from the opening *I Can't Live Without You* through all 15 tracks. It's an impressive feat to maintain such a high standard of material and

there's definitely a sense that the maids always have an eye on how massive these songs will go over live. From the shout-along 'Hey! Hey!' of *Rock In Me* to the exuberant energy of *Domination*, these tunes are custom-crafted to get fists in the air and feet bouncing. *Daydreaming* and *Anemone* slow down the tempo for a moment for a pair of power ballads that bring just a dash of pop to the mix, but they still feature slick guitar work from Kanami Tono. It's not a shredder's album, so Tono keeps her solos short and sweet, never letting them overstay their welcome.

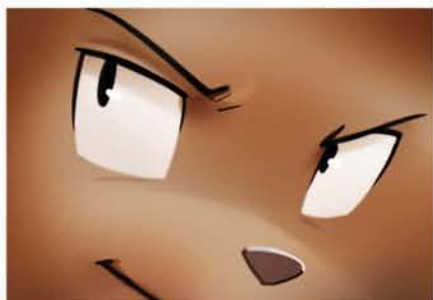
Halestorm's Lzzy Hale wishes she could write anthems this strong and tunes so ridiculously catchy. *World Domination* isn't just one of the best J-rock albums you'll hear this year, it's already one of 2018's best hard rock albums period. ●

★★★★★

SERIOUS




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WALKING ON SUNSHINE!

Mu's who? There's a new *Love Live!* idol group in town! This month, NEO's Jacob Boniface dives into the oceanic exploits of the Aqours, and gets to know the roster of new series *Love Live! Sunshine!*

A COMBINATION OF the uniquely Japanese mediums of anime, manga, video games, light novels, and of course, idol music, *Love Live!* was understandably a huge hit right from the moment that the first manga was released back in 2012. Conceived as a multimedia franchise that was developed in tandem between anime studio Sunrise, the music label Lantis, and the manga magazine *Dengeki G's*, the series initially followed the school idol group named The μ's (pronounced 'mu's'), who wowed audiences in the series and real life, with both their performances and the happy-go-lucky story of their journey to the top of the idol world! The manga was the first portion of the series' saga to see a release, and continues to run, even six years later – but it was arguably the anime adaptation, with its expertly animated dance numbers and hugely popular soundtrack, that really propelled the series into the limelight, a year after the franchise's inception.

However, it's not just the anime and manga portions of *Love Live!* that have led to the series' huge success. The light novel spin-off, entitled *Love Live! School Idol Diary* gave fans a fresh look at the series, with each volume of the novel series retelling the story from a different idol's perspective, viewing the events of the *Love Live!* series through nine (very) different points of view! Gaming fans were also introduced to the series through *Love Live! School Idol Festival*, an iOS and Android game that combines elements of rhythm action and collectible card games, which was a hugely addictive hit within the anime and gaming community. And naturally for a series so focused on music, the various idol groups of *Love Live!* have released

dozens upon dozens of songs, with more than 27 albums having been released to date!

THE PARTY DON'T STOP...

Given the immense love for *Love Live!*, it's probably no surprise that the demand for more content grew too much for one story to contain, and so *Love Live! Sunshine*, an all-new spin-off series, was created! The series, which begins some time after the μ's have already risen to stardom as school idols, follows Chika Takami, who forms her own idol supergroup, despite the many setbacks in her way – such as not knowing anyone who even wants to be an idol! Nevertheless, Chika's infectious enthusiasm proves too much for her friends and fellow students to resist, and the new heroines of *Love Live!*, the Aqours, are born!

Hailing from the seaside town of Uchiura, the Aqours' school faces a similar dilemma to the μ's high school – Otonokiazaka Academy – specifically being closed to be merged with another campus. Inspired by the legend of the μ's, and determined to save their school, the Aqours seek to enter the Love Live School Idol Contest, but it won't be easy, as they aren't the only group to have been introduced to the idol lifestyle in the μ's' wake, and the contest is now seriously competitive!

It's tough to say whether the relatively inexperienced new Aqours will be able to keep up with the competition, but you'll be able to find out this April, when the series gets a home release in the UK from Anime Limited! But if you're eager to get a sneak peek at some of the Aqours' energetic adventures (and why wouldn't you be?), here's a preview of some of the series' best moments! >>>



LOVE LIVE! SUNSHINE TOP FIVE CUTEST MOMENTS!

With no less than nine cheery and charming heroines, a series like *Love Live! Sunshine* is going to be chock-full of amusing and endearing moments! Here's a selection of five such events, plucked from the series' first season.



5 SUMMER TRAINING CAMP

Even when school's out, the Aqours are still school idols! In the tenth episode of the series, the Aqours are finally up to their full nine members, and to celebrate, Dia makes them all... a training regimen? Even during the holidays, the Aqours schedule is packed, as they take on not only their new intensive physical training (modeled after the workouts of the famous μ 's, no less), but also managing a snack bar!

These scenes definitely qualify as being some of the cutest throughout the series' 13 episode run, as lighthearted and sunny as the show's title would suggest. There are also some great moments when the gang first try their hand at running the snack bar – You, Yoshiko and Mari all have their own weird and wonderful styles of cooking that are either delicious, or disturbing, depending on one's palette, and Dia's competitive streak comes out when she realises a rival snack bar from the 'big city' is just next door. Also, this episode is one of the first times that we get to see the Aqours' full roster together at last... and for more info on the characters, check out the guide on the next page!



4 THE FIRST PERFORMANCE

At the end of the third episode – after their various promotional mishaps – the starting trio of the Aqours approach the stage for the first time, ready to give it their all and show the world (or at least their school) what they can do. Their futures as school idols depends on filling the auditorium, but as they begin, they see that only a handful of people have shown up! Nevertheless, Chika and crew do what they do best, putting everything they have into their performance... when the power cuts out.



But all's well that ends well, and when a mysterious onlooker restores the power with the help of some quick thinking (and a couple of portable generators), the newly-formed Aqours find themselves in front of a full room of cheering audience members! (Turns out they put the wrong time on the aforementioned flyers...) The rest of the show goes off without a hitch, as Chika, You, and Riko continue their performance, and take the first step on the road to stardom. It's moments like this one that illustrate what the Aqours (and really, the series as a whole) are all about – trying your hardest to achieve your dreams!



3 THE PROMO VIDEO

Disaster strikes halfway through the series, as the girls discover that their beloved Uranohoshi is to be merged with another high school, due to dwindling attendance rates. However, this does little to deter Chika – in fact, quite the opposite, as she takes the situation's similarity to The μ's original predicament as a sign that their school idol journey is about to begin! Now six members strong, the Aqours take another leaf out of The μ's playbook, and decide to film a promotional video about their town to bolster interest in the school, not to mention their own idol group!

That being said, their sleepy town, despite its scenic views and sparkling ocean, seems to offer them little material to bring in new students, despite

their best efforts (and video montaging skills). Until, that is, the annual event on the first day of beach season gives the girls an idea. As the sun rises over the beaches of Uchiura, the entire town sets free hundreds of paper lanterns, which rise up into the sky, providing the perfect backdrop for the Aqours, their roster now almost complete, to film their promotional music video from the rooftops, complete with matching costumes and dance routines.

This episode of *Sunshine*, especially the girls' first attempts at promotional filmmaking around their town, is cute and funny in equal measure – but it's that final scene that is one of the most triumphantly sweet moments of the series, as the Aqours take another step towards their dreams, with their entire town looking on in support of them!



2 CHIKA MEETS RIKO

A more sweet and heartfelt scene from the series' very first episode, this moment sees the usually over-the-top Chika explaining her reasons for founding the school idol group to Riko, as she attempts to convince the somewhat shy pianist to join the band.

Taking place on a particularly picturesque beach during a beautiful sunset, the scene is a standout bittersweet moment from the show, as Chika reveals her past to her new acquaintance – namely, how she was inspired from her previous listlessness by seeing a performance by The μ's. Despite her perceived lack of talent at anything in particular, Chika nevertheless decided to reach for just about the most high-flying dream someone can have – to become a school idol!

Although perhaps not as traditionally 'cute' as some of the entries on this list, this scene will undoubtedly touch anyone who watches it, as plucky protagonist Chika opens up to her new friend, illustrating her resolve and the dream she has, to make both herself and her future fans happy. Couple that with the gorgeous scenery and animation, and this is one of the most perfect beginnings a series could possibly have!



1 THE AQOURS TRY FLYERING

Though they of course become a talented and hard-working team of performers, the Aqours had a rocky start! Their first performance especially was plagued with obstacles: as school director – and future Aqours member – Mari forces them to fill the school auditorium with adoring audience members if they want to keep their place as an after-school club! Undeterred, the three first members of the Aqours (Chika, You, and Riko) try their hand at handing out flyers, complete with adorable chibi versions of the trio, to, well, anyone in town who'll listen to them!

However, despite their perseverance, the three fledgling idols are met with mixed reactions from their first encounter with their potential fans. While the energetic and charismatic You is an instant hit, the other two have their own foibles when it comes to the art of flyering – Chika's enthusiasm and generally overbearing nature actually ends up frightening off some people, while the reserved Riko, though a musical prodigy, has the opposite problem, finding it difficult to approach strangers to tell them about the performance. An early scene in the series' run, this fun scene perfectly illustrates the charm of the group's diverse personalities!

ALL THE AQOURS!

The Aqours roster is a pretty diverse bunch of girls, each with their own quirks and foibles, although they're all united eventually by their shared love of music and performance! Here's a little bit of a primer to introduce this new nonet.



CHIKA TAKAMI

The heroine of *Love Live Sunshine!!*, and the original founder of both the Uranohoshi School Idol Club, as well as their first idol group, known as the Aqours! Originally inspired by seeing a live performance of The μ's (the all-singing, all-dancing performers of the first *Love Live!* series), Chika starts the series not knowing quite how she'll manage to achieve her goals, but she has the heart and guts to succeed, no matter what obstacles stand in her way! With Chika at the helm, it's easy to see where the Aqours get their 'never give up' attitude...



YOU WATANABE

Chika's best friend, You was the first member to join Chika in forming the Aqours. Though she started out in the school idol game mainly trying to help her slightly overbearing friend, You soon discovered a talent for, and love of, singing and dancing. With dreams of captaining her own ferry in the future, You is a more even-keeled counterpart to Chika's rambunctious style of leadership, while still maintaining the energetic and optimistic outlook that brings the Aqours such success – and, she's the group's main costume coordinator, mainly due to her love of uniforms!



RIKO SAKURAUCHI

A skillful piano player, Riko is perhaps the most musically talented of the Aqours crew! After You, Riko was the first member of the Aqours who was headhunted by Chika. Although she was initially a little reserved, having just transferred to the Uranohoshi school, Riko was inspired by Chika's fervour, and was one of the three to take part in the Aqours' fateful first performance. Riko quickly finds a whole lot of fast friends in her fellow Aqours and, grateful for their warm welcome to her new home, dedicates herself to helping each of them achieve their dreams!



KANAN MATSURA

Of all the group, Kanan might fit the Aqours' aquatic theme better than any other – as an accomplished diver, Kanan is certainly no stranger to the world of undersea life! Although kept busy helping to run her grandparents' diving shop, Kanan is nonetheless swept up in Chika's outlandish dream. Due to her athleticism and past galliances with the school idol life, Kanan serves as the group's main choreographer, as well as providing a laid-back attitude, which provides a useful counterpoint to some of the other Aqours' intense outlooks!



DIA KUROSAWA

If there's anyone who seemed the least likely to be a member of a school idol group, it's Dia! She's outwardly disdainful of Chika and her dreams, and as a president of the student council seems to want to do everything in her power to stop the Aqours before they even get started! However, her past love of idols is, despite her best efforts, only lying dormant, and Dia too falls prey to the group's siren song.



YOSHIKO TSUSHIMA

Is she Yoshiko, ordinary(ish) schoolgirl and new member of the Aqours... or is she YOHANE, a fallen angel who has demonic abilities after being cast out of heaven for angering God? Spoiler alert, it's definitely the first one, as Yoshiko is a chunibyo, a term for someone with delusions of having special powers or a secret identity. But despite her strange tendency towards the supernatural, Yoshiko is welcomed with open arms!



HANAMARU KUNIKIDA

One of the youngest members of the Aqours, along with Ruby, Hanamaru seems like she'd be too reserved for the glamorous and glitzy life of an idol. Part of a family of rustic temple caretakers, Hanamaru is more naive to some elements of modern life, but her caring nature means that she can't help but take even some of the older members of the group under her wing. Plus, it helps that she has a real talent for singing!



RUBY KUROSAWA

Ruby is without a doubt the shyest member of the Aqours group! Despite her longtime love of idols, Ruby's shyness keeps her from immediately joining Chika in her school idol endeavours. However, after seeing the newly-formed Aqours at work, her enthusiasm for the world of idols takes over, and she joins the team, despite her trepidation! As Dia's little sister, Ruby is the baby of the team, but still bravely faces her fears.



MARI OHARA

Mari also seems like an unlikely candidate for a member of a school idol group, but the enthusiasm of Chika and the gang can't help but rekindle her love of the world of idols! Mari is the refined and wealthy child of the Ohara family, one of the Uranohoshi School's main benefactors – which is why, despite being a student there, she is also the school's director! However, despite all that, she's an enthusiastic member of the group!



ARE YOU READY FOR THIS?!

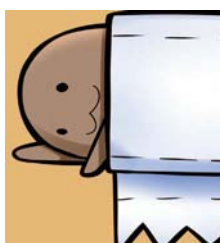
With bold characters, bright and bouncy songs, and an inspiring coming-of-age story, it looks like *Love Live! Sunshine* will be as big a success as the first series was, and a worthy addition to the multimedia franchise! The series will be seeing a UK release from Anime Limited in DVD format as well as a Collector's Edition Blu-ray for all the diehard Aqours fans! The series drops on 9 of April, just in time to welcome in the warm weather with the summery fun of the *Sunshine* crew! As always, remember to keep an eye on the pages of NEO for further news and the review of the series!



NEO ARTIST SHOWCASE

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AGE 19

BASED IN SINGAPORE

PROFESSION STUDENT

FAVOURITE PREPARATION I LIKE TO JUST SIT THERE AND STARE INTO BLANK SPACE TO CLEAR MY HEAD BEFORE I START WORKING ON SOMETHING.

BIOGRAPHY

I've been drawing ever since I was young, but I only started taking it seriously three years ago. The kind of artwork that I create is usually based on characters and titles that I find interesting or are currently popular, so for me it's the never-ending race to catch up to what's hot right now.

My art direction is generally influenced by Japanese animation and games. As I am currently studying in a games design diploma course, I get quite a lot of exposure to games. I joined Collateral Damage Studios as a doujin member in 2017 after working in their professional team as an intern for three months. With their connections, I got to meet more local artists and learn from them.

So far, all I know is self-taught, except some bits and pieces of advice from my school lecturers.



INSPIRATION

Games, anime, art from other people, movies, and scale-figures. As I am an illustrator who does mostly fanart, these are the sources that give me ideas and content to create. Seeing other artists' works also motivates me to do better.



1. Akagi & Kaga: Fanart of Akagi and Kaga from popular smartphone game *Azur Lane*. I always feel that it's kind of hard when drawing more than one character onto the same canvas. **2. SEIKA:** This is a piece for a 2D platformer game for the Anime Festival Asia Singapore (AFA) featuring the event's pink-haired mascot character Seika. This was probably my first digital illustration that I put my whole heart and soul into. It was also the artwork that first got the attention of CDS! **3. Lyria's awakening:** This is Lyria from *Granblue Fantasy*, also a popular Japanese smartphone game. Lyria is releasing Proto-Bahamut's power. This was a challenging one as I had problems trying to make it feel powerful, and this had a lot of clean-up work from all the effects I drew in. **4. Thera: The Defender of the Mana Vein:** She's the boss I designed for a game I'm making with a few friends.

NEO WANTS YOU

If you are interested in submitting work to be featured in the NEO ARTIST SHOWCASE, please email mail@neomag.co.uk with 'ARTIST SHOWCASE' as your subject header, along with an internet link with examples of your work.



[ANIME REVIEW]

PRINCESS ARETE

A soporific fairy-tale

OUT NOW // ANIME LIMITED // PG // FANTASY, CHILDREN'S // DVD (£17.99), BLU-RAY (£19.99), COLLECTORS BLU-RAY AND DVD (£34.99) // 105 MINS

PLOT Arete is a little girl who's too clever to be a passive princess. She's imprisoned by a selfish wizard in a remote crumbling castle; her captor is trapped himself by his obsession with a lost world. But Arete won't give up her freedom...

This is the only film by director Sunao Katabuchi that British viewers haven't been able to see yet. His other films were outstanding: the Hiroshima period drama *In This Corner of the World*, and the happier *Totoro*-ish nostalgia piece, *Mai Mai Miracle*. (Katabuchi was also Assistant Director on Miyazaki's *Kiki's Delivery Service*.)

So anyone would hope that Katabuchi's 2001 film *Princess Arete* was a neglected gem, a great find. And... it's really not.

Earnest but glacial, it's a progressive fairy tale. Arete is a little-girl princess who spends much of the film imprisoned. First she's shut up in her own family castle, where she gazes wistfully from her tower over a lively town, which she sometimes visits by sneaking through a secret passage. Later she's imprisoned again by a selfish, centuries-old wizard who wins her hand by trickery, then locks her up in a distant land because of a prophecy that she'll destroy him.

Arete is absurdly slow. Sure, there are some lovely

leisurely anime, but *Arete* makes *Ronja* or *Kaguya* look like *Kill la Kill*. There's a chronic lack of momentum, with many scenes and characters in the first half proving extremely peripheral to the story. This would be understandable in a long TV serial, but the dawdling is maddening in a film. True, it reflects a deeper theme. The wizard character is locked in a kind of spiritual stasis, and he infects the land and people around him with the same unchanging weariness, which is a perfectly good fantasy idea. But it doesn't stop *Arete* from being terribly boring.

The film's presentation is also very old-fashioned, evoking children's anime of 20 or more years before 2001. There are good details in the animation, some pleasantly picture-book compositions, and a cool flying machine, but the look may repel viewers weaned on 21st century anime. Several characters are interesting in principle, but there's so little chemistry between them that *Arete* is a fairy story starved of storytelling.

It's based on a feminist British kids' book (*The Clever Princess*) which was far brisker and funnier. The film mocks the "prince saves princess" story traditions, but *Shrek* nailed them the same year. Of course, *Arete* has a more elegant sensibility than the raucous *Shrek*, but other refined cartoon films did such fairy tales better. Try France's *The King and the Mockingbird*, which influenced Miyazaki, or *The Last Unicorn*, which was drawn but not produced in Japan. At least *Arete* has a good ending, but it's far too late.

A fatally dawdling, uninvolved fairy tale that will have many viewers turning off or dozing off. ●

★★★★☆

LIMITED EDITION

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With foes that are stronger than ever, developers Omega Force have also stepped up the battle system, so donning your Omni-Directional Mobility Gear and wading into action is even more fun than ever before! Expect sneak attacks, more co-operation between human characters, and new weapons, all giving more freedom to the players.

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ONE-ARMED AND DANGEROUS

In the late 1960s, Chang Cheh transformed Hong Kong cinema with the story of an indefatigable maimed hero that broke box office records and helped to launch the New Wuxia Century at Shaw Brothers. David West celebrates the legacy of *One-Armed Swordsman*.

THE GREAT MAN Theory posits that history is defined by the lives of a handful of significant figures. It's certainly contentious but casting an eye over the history of Hong Kong cinema, any list of Great Men would have to include director Chang Cheh.

In the latter half of the 1960s, Mandarin cinema was dominated by romances, and female stars outnumbered men, but Chang's films, filled with his trademark staunch masculinity, turned Mandarin cinema on its head. At Shaw Brothers studios Chang and fellow filmmaker King Hu instigated the New Wuxia Century, a wave of swordplay movies that tapped into the success of the martial arts novels that were popular at the time. Chang, whose background was in Peking Opera and theatre, had been working as a scriptwriter and director with modest success, fostering the career of an upcoming actor called Jimmy Wang Yu on *Tiger Boy*, *The Twin Swords* and *The Magnificent Trio* in 1965 and 1966. Then in 1967 he hit the jackpot with *One-Armed Swordsman*. The movie took over HK\$1 million at the box office, a massive figure for the period, and earned Chang the nickname of The Million Dollar Director while inspiring a slew of sequels, rip-offs and remakes.

The story centres around Fang Gang (Wang Yu), a poor boy who is raised by martial arts master Chi Rufeng (Tien Feng), much to the disapproval of Chi's stuck-up, rich students and his spoiled daughter Chi Pei-Er (Pan Ying-Zi). When Fang decides to leave Chi's household to avoid conflict, Pei-Er cuts off his

right arm in a fit of pique. Fang is nursed back to health by the kindly Xiaoman (Lisa Chiao Chiao). He learns to use a sword with his left arm, which comes in handy (see what we did there?) when two villains, Smiling Tiger Cheng (Tang Ti) and the Long-Armed Devil (Yeung Chi-Hing), kidnap Pei-Er and start slaughtering Chi's students.

A NIGHT AT THE OPERA

One-Armed Swordsman was a key film in establishing a new style of swordplay action choreography. The martial arts instructors on the movie were Tong Kai and Lau Kar-Leung. The former, like Chang Cheh, came from a background in Peking Opera, having studied under Yuen Siu-Tien who would later star opposite Jackie Chan in *Drunken Master*. Lau Kar-Leung would become perhaps the greatest kung fu movie filmmaker ever in the late '70s, and although Lau was an expert in the Southern Hung Kuen style, the action in *One-Armed Swordsman* draws much more heavily on the northern Peking Opera tradition of Tong and Chang, full of acrobatics, flips, and broad theatrical gestures. Alongside King Hu's *Come Drink With Me*, Chang's opera-inspired fight scenes established the predominant mode of action in Mandarin language cinema until the meteoric rise of Bruce Lee in the 1970s. Wang Yu may not have been the slickest martial artist in Hong Kong cinema, but he was notoriously tough offscreen. He was stabbed during a fight in 1981 and when a young Jackie



"CASTING AN EYE OVER THE HISTORY OF HONG KONG CINEMA, ANY LIST OF GREAT MEN WOULD HAVE TO INCLUDE DIRECTOR CHANG CHEH."

Chan needed help getting out of his contract with filmmaker Lo Wei, he called in Wang Yu, whose Triad connections – and a brawl in a restaurant – persuaded Lo Wei to relent.

BLOOD AND GUTS

One-Armed Swordsman established a motif that would reoccur throughout Chang's work – the disembowelled hero. When one of Chi's students Deng Chong (Cheng Lui) confronts the villains, he is slashed across the stomach. Mortally wounded, he binds up his belly and fights on to his last breath. This is another reflection of the director's theatre background, a reference to the opera *Jiepai Guan*, or *Frontier Gate* in English. While in *One-Armed Swordsman* the disembowelment happens to a supporting character, Chang would return to this image again and again for the heroes of his subsequent works. It happens in *Vengeance*, *Man Of Iron*, *The Boxer From Shantung*, *Disciples Of Shaolin*, *Chinatown Kid*, and *Men From The Monastery*. This danse macabre, in which a wounded character chooses to fight to the death rather than surrender, became such a staple of Chang's work that his protégé Lau Kar-Leung would mercilessly satirise it in 1982's *Legendary Weapons Of Kung Fu* (aka *Legendary Weapons Of China*).

NO YIN, ALL YANG

One of Chang's many contributions to Hong Kong cinema was the notion of yanggang, or staunch masculinity. His heroes were proud, tough, and willing to die for their beliefs. Having become a star in Chang's films, Wang Yu turned director with *The Chinese Boxer* in 1970, leaving Shaw Brothers to work at Golden Harvest for *One-Armed Boxer* and *Beach Of The War Gods*. Yet he never really evolved his own style of filmmaking with his movies drawing heavily from Chang's work, his

doomed heroes always full of that yanggang spirit. This notion is present in *Fist Of Fury* or King Hu's *The Valiant Ones* and although it would fall out of vogue in the kung fu comedies of the late 1970s, it found a new home in John Woo's gangster epics in the 1980s. Woo started his career as an assistant director for Chang and his wu xia movie, *Last Hurrah Chivalry*, is a collection of motifs from Chang's work.

Typically for Chang's staunchly masculine work, *One-Armed Swordsman* has little time for love and romance. Fang spurns Pei-Er's advances and although he marries Xiaoman, Chang wastes no time on scenes of them kissing or embracing. The plot device of a hero maimed by a woman came from Jin Yong's novel *The Giant Eagle And Its Companion*, but despite the injury Fang suffers at the hands of Pei-er, when she and her father are in danger, he comes charging to the rescue. In his unwavering loyalty to his master, Fang represents the Confucian notion of wu de, virtue attained through the discipline of martial arts practice. He triumphs not just because he's one tough son-of-a-sword, but because he's the better person. Who needs two arms when you've got modesty like that?

Grab a slice of Chang's ground-breaking, testosterone-charged action – *One-Armed Swordsman* comes to DVD and Blu-ray on 26 March from 88 Films. ●

ONE-ARMED IN JAPAN

Much of Wang Yu's career in the 1970s was spent tinkering with the one-armed hero formula. In 1971, worlds collided in *Zatoichi And The One-Armed Swordsman* which pitted Wang's hero against Shintaro Katsu's blind swordsman. It's an intriguing premise, but Wang's operatic action style sits uneasily alongside Katsu's quick-draw swordsmanship.

The Blade

Tsui Hark has built a successful career out of resurrecting characters and concepts from Hong Kong's cinematic vaults. In 1995 he remade Chang's *One-Armed Swordsman* as *The Blade* with Vincent Zhao in the lead role as the hero who must relearn his martial arts skills after losing his right arm.



[FILM REVIEW]

FULLMETAL ALCHEMIST

Thin tin alchemist, more like

OUT NOW ON NETFLIX // 15 // FANTASY, ADVENTURE
// 134 MINS

PLOT In a parallel world where alchemy is a real science (and combat weapon), two remarkable young brothers seek the Philosopher's Stone which might lift the curse on their bodies. But the secret of the stone is monstrous, and monsters guard it.

This live-action take on Hiromu Arakawa's beloved adventure may be out on Netflix, but it's a bona fide theatrical movie, fresh from Japanese cinemas. Director Fumihiko Sori previously made a manically enjoyable live-action film of the *Ping Pong* manga; he also made *Vexille*, a provocatively-themed CG anime. His *Alchemist* is a Japanese film with Japanese actors, so whitewashing isn't an issue. So long as you don't think a Japanese cast in a European setting is weird...

For all that, this *Alchemist* is worse than last year's *Death Note*. There have been good live-action manga adaptations recently, like *Tokyo Ghoul* and *Parasyte* (the first part). Both were grounded in today's world, but *Alchemist* has plenty of puffing steam trains and European architecture to bolster Arakawa's fantasy milieu (much of the filming was in Italy). Its render-limited CG effects could have been passable if the film had found the balance of its source: the humour and mystery, the darkness and charm. Instead there's a weak script, even

weaker visual storytelling, and dull, dull characters.

We're assuming you know what *Alchemist*'s about; if not, there's a manga, or two excellent anime series to choose from, both on Netflix. The film combines some of the main early storylines, with shifts and tweaks. For example, Ed's and Al's first adventure is set in the streets of a quaint Italian town ruled by a quack priest; this is reworked from a desert town story in other versions. Many other characters and plot strands are dropped or reduced to references in spare dialogue.

That's sensible enough, but so much else works against the film. The lighting, cutting and staging are immensely boring; it's like watching bog-standard TV show. The talky scenes (and there are many) are horribly lifeless. The luckless actors seldom manage to convey a believable emotion; it feels especially wrong to make Winry cutesy. But then their script exterminates chemistry. It ignores what should always be at *Alchemist*'s heart, the *relationship* between the Elric brothers, cross, exasperated and deeply loving.

Instead, the film keeps Ed and Al apart for long stretches, *telling* us about their closeness in rotten dialogue. One exchange involving apple pie feels like it's from a *Star Wars* prequel. Then the script has Al fear he's not "real," before we've been persuaded that he is. It's interesting to see the choices this version makes, and a handful of its CG effects are cool, involving the birth and cremation of monsters. Otherwise it's a travesty, but far too dull to get annoyed about.

Just another bad adaptation, though infuriatingly it suggests a live-action, Japan-budgeted *Alchemist* could have worked. ●

★★★★★

TO BE CONTINUED?

A brief post-credits scene is obviously a Marvel-style sequel hook. Sori says he would like to use more of *Alchemist*'s characters in a sequel, but as of writing, a second film isn't confirmed.

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[ANIME REVIEW]

KAKEGURUI

Vegas on campus!

OUT NOW ON NETFLIX // 15 // PSYCHOLOGICAL, COMEDY // 270 MINS

PLOT Hayakkaou Academy may look upstanding to the outside world, but within it is a world of endless gambling contests, where the winners enslave the losers. Into this world comes poor, sweet, naïve Yumeko, a lamb to the slaughter... or so everyone thinks.

After *Devilman Crybaby*, Netflix's next complete new anime series is the larkish, capering *Kakegurui*. It may feel very different from *Crybaby* but it prods those same guilty pleasure centres that got lots of us into anime. It's essentially a fight show. A heroine takes on a succession of rival students in a fantasy school; it's the *Kill la Kill* playbook. But instead of superweapons and sentient sailor-suits, the duels are fought at tables with cards, gambling chips, raging egos and molten obsessions.

Yumeko is the transfer student, a seemingly naïve beauty, always with a smile and simper. She's also a deadly gambling genius. She's like boy strategists like *Death Note*'s Light or *Code Geass*'s Lelouch, but there's a crucial difference; while the other characters have interior monologues, we never know what Yumeko's really thinking, leaving everyone second guessing her. Her voice whispers lethal seduction to boys and girls alike. She's played magnetically in Japanese by Saori Hayama, continents away from her role as the deaf Shoko in *A Silent Voice*.

Yumeko will overturn Hayakkaou Academy, an elite

school ruled by its student council and its gambling matches that destroy its pupils. It's a world as daftly fun as *Kill la Kill*'s Honnouji Academy. Instead of hyperactive zooming fighters, the gambling duels are fought through faces; perhaps the players are *really* competing to see who can pull the worst expressions. Expect bulging eyes, grinding teeth and bestial grimaces to have any *actual* beasts whimpering.

It's also a shamelessly schoolgirl-fetish show. Most of the players are female, and while *Kakegurui* is less fanservice-y than the opening titles suggest, it's still full of lewd suggestions and orgasmic passions (and we do mean *orgasmic*), bringing the naughty *Shimoneta* to mind.

But it's possible there's a subversive agenda. The male viewpoint character is as uselessly ornamental as Chris Hemsworth's man-bimbo in the remade *Ghostbusters*. The other guys are either monsters (in different ways), or fanboys who worship the academy's female idol singer – and there's a *very* funny story-arc about this cute celebrity, serving as a sarcastic alternative to *Love Live!*.

It's even possible to see a hysterically high-sexed girl maniac as a snarky counter-stereotype. She doesn't fit the "beauty" standards of the other characters, and that seems to have helped her become a frustrated nympho.

Or maybe the show just loves making bewildering creative decisions, much like Yumeko. Yet for both of them, there's a suggestion of a real personality under all the flamboyant play-acting and fan servicing.

You'd never think that two teens gambling at a table could be such fun, and Yumeko is a truly intriguing creation. ●

★★★★☆

FANTASY WORLD

Kakegurui was broadcast on Japanese TV last summer, but Netflix licensed it outside Japan. In Japan, *Kakegurui* is even more of a fantasy; most gambling is illegal, with a few exceptions like pachinko.



[GAME REVIEW]

DYNASTY WARRIORS 9

Repetitive Strain Injury

OUT NOW // KOEI TECMO EUROPE // 16 // HACK AND SLASH // £49.99 (PC), £54.99 (PS4), £54.99 (XBOX ONE)

PLOT *Dynasty Warriors*, as always, loosely follows the story of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In its ninth instalment, the series features a fully open world to traverse for the first time. Travel on foot, on horse, or by boat; *Dynasty Warriors* has never been bigger.

A multitude of main and side-missions become available as you explore the game, and it's not hard to lose sight of the main mission as you accept a variety of side quests on your journey. The core gameplay has seen improvements thanks to a robust combo system, but you're still able to happily hack and slash your way

through hundreds of enemies quickly. Its increased ambition isn't without sacrifices, and it suffers from severe, and frankly unacceptable framerate drops which often dip below 30fps. The English voice-over is stiff and lacking emotion, and the game clearly suffers from a tight budget.

Dynasty Warriors 9 expands the series with its open-world elements, but it won't convert you into a fan if you weren't one already. It feels as if other aspects that made the franchise fun have suffered in order to create a mostly barren in-game universe, and it's hard to say that it was worth it. The hack and slash elements that fans still love is present, but the mainline series still pales in comparison to its many spin-offs.

Dynasty Warriors 9 introduces welcome gameplay refinements but is ultimately underwhelming. ●

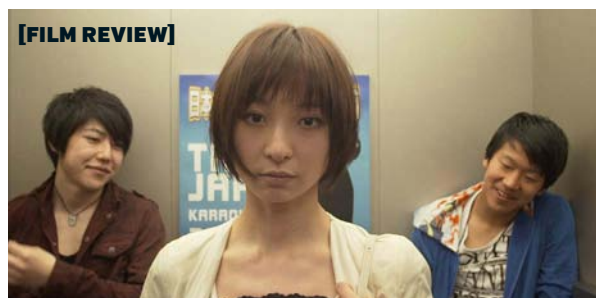
★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

If you like this, then you should try *Fire Emblem Warriors* and the upcoming *A.O.T. 2* which are both by the same developer - Omega Force.



[FILM REVIEW]



RE:BORN

A one-man knife crime epidemic

OUT NOW // EUREKA ENTERTAINMENT // 15 // ACTION // £12.99 (DUAL FORMAT) // 100 MINS

PLOT Toshiro (Tak Sakaguchi) is an ex-special forces operative living a quiet life looking after his niece Sachi (Yura Kondo) and working in a convenience store. When his former commanding officer Phantom (Akio Otsuka) kidnaps Sachi in a bid for revenge for ruining his career, Tak must go to war again.

Re:Born reunites Tak Sakaguchi with Yuji Shimomura, who last directed him in 2005's *Death Trace*. With both men having extensive backgrounds as stunt coordinators, it's not surprising that *Re:Born* is strongest in the action scenes, but the film suffers from a lazy plot that feels over-familiar - *The Man From*



Nowhere covered very similar ground with more style. Most of the running time is devoted to scenes of Toshiro and his allies hacking their way through hordes of faceless enemies which means little time for character development. Sachi is the most likeable, engaging figure onscreen, whereas Toshiro and his arch-rival, the equally deadly Abyss Walker (Yoshitaka Inagawa), are essentially blank slates in search of personalities. The action focuses on short-range knife work, but too much of the detail in the fighting is obscured by distracting camerawork. William Friedkin's 2003 film *The Hunted* was a stronger showcase for knife-based choreography, although the fight between Toshiro and an assassin in a phonebooth is excellent.

Re:Born doesn't pack as much of a punch as it could have; there's not much to care about amongst the carnage. ●

★★★★★

TRIVIA

Mariko Shinoda, who plays the killer codenamed Newt that fights Toshiro in the phonebooth, is a former member of the idol group AKB48. Now that's a dramatic change of career!

WORDS BY DAVID WEST



[GAME REVIEW]

BAYONETTA 2

Non Stop Infinite Climax!

OUT NOW // NINTENDO EUROPE // 16 // HACK AND SLASH // £49.99 (SWITCH)

PLOT These games feature one of the world's greatest heroines, Bayonetta (who is an ostracized and amnesiac Umbra Witch) as she battles against the Lumen Sages. Flaunting unabashed sex appeal and a keen eye for fashion, Bayonetta fights her foes in the most stylish way imaginable.

Featuring all the deep combat and high-octane action that developer Platinum Games is known for, *Bayonetta 2* follows the titular witch as she fights to save Jeanne, her enemy-turned-friend.

Button-mash your way through waves of angels as you slow down time, twirl around with guns (which are also attached to

your feet), and strip down to an almost naked state as you contort your hair to mimic various monsters.

Bayonetta 2 is an amazing action game where your reaction time is tested, and you're able to defeat towering foes in a display of colour and creativity. It's difficult not to smile at the heroine's cheeky banter, and Nintendo even got in on the fun by adding character-themed outfits for her from several of their own titles.

The two games, both available in this one release, may be pushing nine and six years old respectively, but their smooth, deep gameplay, fantastic visuals, hilarious dialogue and entertaining soundtracks place them among the greatest hack and slash titles on the market.

***Bayonetta* wholly deserved another chance to prove itself, and it's a great fit for Switch. Both of these games are must plays for hack and slash fans! ●**

★★★★★

WORDS BY DAVID WEST

SEQUEL

If it wasn't for Nintendo swooping in to fund the series and bring it in as an exclusive to the Wii U and then Switch, we wouldn't even have a *Bayonetta 2*!



[FILM REVIEW]



HOUSE

When summer vacation goes to hell

OUT NOW // EUREKA ENTERTAINMENT // 15 // COMEDY, HORROR // £16.99 (BLU-RAY) // 88 MINS

PLOT Angered that her dad has a new fiancée, Angel (Kimiko Ikegami) decides to spend her summer vacation at her aunt's country house with six friends. But then the girls start disappearing one at a time...

Nobuhiko Obayashi's psychedelic headtrip comes to Blu-ray for the first time and, 40 years after it was first released in Japan, it remains just as inventive and delirious as ever. One moment, *House* plays like a tongue-in-cheek spoof of a high school movie as the excitable girls plan their summer vacation and generally act adorable, but once the supernatural element takes over, it

becomes a phantasmagoria of weirdness with a sinister cat and the menacing figure of Angel's aunt (Yoko Minamida). Each of the girls has a defining nickname – Melody loves music, Fantasy is always daydreaming, and Kung Fu practices martial arts, and their unhappy fates are usually tied to their personalities. While the special effects look dated now, Obayashi floods the screen with memorable imagery, including disembodied figures playing a piano. Despite the rising body count, the tone is always mischievous as Obayashi spoofs cinema genre conventions, from the tidal wave of blood that floods the house to the hilariously over-played glamour shots of the actresses.

Obayashi understands the tropes of the teen horror film but refuses to play by their rules. Artfully designed, beautifully shot, and unashamedly bonkers. ●

★★★★★

TRIVIA

When Toho studios commissioned Obayashi to write what became *House*, they were hoping for something akin to Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*. Imagine their surprise!



[FILM REVIEW]

BROTHERHOOD OF BLADES II: THE INFERNAL BATTLEFIELD

Murder, mystery and martial arts in the Ming Dynasty

OUT NOW // THUNDERBIRD RELEASING // 15 // MARTIAL ARTS // £10.00 (DVD) // 115 MINS

PLOT While investigating the murder of a court official, Imperial Guard Shen Lian (Chang Chen) suspects the death is part of a plot to kill the Emperor. As he searches for those behind the plot, he risks implicating himself when he decides to protect the beautiful painter Bei Zhai (Yang Mi).

Director Lu Yang returns to the lead character from his superb 2014 hit *Brotherhood Of Blades* and manages to craft a sequel as satisfying as the original. Technically, the new film is a prequel, so you don't need to have seen the first movie to understand this one. That said, the plot is sufficiently dense that it requires the viewer's fullest attention to navigate all the constantly shifting loyalties and double-crosses contained herein.

Different factions within the Imperial Court all compete to curry favour with Master Wei (Chin Shih-Chieh), the Emperor's closest adviser, and ruthlessly exploit any chance to discredit their rivals. Even as Shen conducts his investigation, he's under constant scrutiny from Pei Lun (Lei Jia-Yin), a Captain in the Imperial Guard who blames Shen for the death of his friend. Shen relies on his boss Colonel Lu (Zhang Yi) for protection, but Lu has troubles of his own trying to deal with

a group of rebels plotting against the throne, led by the lethal swordswoman Ding (Xin Zhilei).

There's a lot to keep track of, but it all hangs together in the end. Lu Yang, who wrote the script with Chen Shu, throws in some political commentary as Bei Zhai is under suspicion because her paintings are deemed to be critical of the government. "I believe that one day we will have freedom of speech," she laments in what could very easily be a criticism of China's current government. Meanwhile, the Imperial Guard's investigators are as chilling as they are cunning.

As in the first movie, the action scenes are excellent with choreography that uses wirework and CG judiciously to enhance the fights without robbing them of all sense of reality. Lei Jia-Yin is terrific as Captain Pei, while Chang Chen impresses in the role of the anti-hero Shen. The scenes between Shen and Bei Zhai are a study in contrasts, he's a tightly wound knot of smouldering aggression, where her beauty and apparent vulnerability mask an unwavering dedication to her cause. The movie looks spectacular on every level, from the gorgeous costumes to the beautiful locations and exquisitely detailed sets.

Lu Yang confirms his place as one of China's most exciting martial arts filmmakers with this thriller where the plot and characters are just as engaging as the swordplay. Will Shen Lian return to make it a trilogy? Fingers crossed! ●

★★★★★

KEY TALENT

Actress and singer Yang Mi is a huge star on Weibo, China's biggest social media platform. With 77 million followers, she is renowned for inspiring new fashion trends.

COSPLAY CORNER

NEO READERS STRUT THEIR STUFF!

[BELOW] Dawn from *Pokémon Diamond and Pearl* by Jemma Louise Vose (JimJamsCosplay). Image by Tim Roberts Photographer.

[BOTTOM LEFT] Miku Hatsune (2017 Good Smile racing version) by Lucy Dawson. Photo by Petits Pois Photography.

[RIGHT] Lucy Dawson as Mari Ohara from *Love Live! Sunshine* (Valentines outfit). Photographer: Catberry

[BOTTOM RIGHT] Phil Saunders as The Joker. Photographer: Shana White.



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WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND

NEO VAULT

ARION

Anime's answer to *Clash of the Titans*

THE 1980S IS the decade most associated with spectacular anime films. This is partly nostalgic bias; many older fans found anime through the likes of *Akira*, *Honnoamise* and *Project A-Ko*. But it also has some objective truth. The best anime movies of the 1980s *do* look different from anything that's come since, much as early Disney films like *Pinocchio* and *Bambi* have a level of "old-school" animation that's still unsurpassed today.

Usually made with little or no CG, '80s anime movies boast eye-popping hand-drawn action animation; brilliant primary colours (Kaneda's crimson motorbike!); and character designs that aren't dominated by school-aged kids, and can emphasise three-dimensional physicality. The films are often outrageous in ways you can love, hate or both together, camp macho fantasies or toxic dinosaurs; either way, they loom over the anime landscape.

At least most do, but the 1986 film *Arion* has been strangely ignored, never getting an English-language release. Many fans would recognise the director – Yoshikazu Yasuhiko, one of the fathers of *Gundam*, who was Character Designer and Animation Director on the original 1979 series. Later he wrote the mammoth manga reworking *Gundam The Origin*, which in turn became a lavish serialised movie in the last couple of years, with Yasuhiko as Chief Director.

Arion was also based on a manga by Yasuhiko, which started in March 1979 (it overlapped the first *Gundam*, which began that April). *Arion* ran till 1984 in *Monthly Comic Ryu*, and was collected in five volumes; it doesn't seem to have been translated in English. The film was released in 1986, animated by *Gundam*'s studio Sunrise. Perhaps one reason it was overlooked is that, unlike many anime films that were sold abroad, *Arion* wasn't science-fiction.

Instead, it's an epic reworking of Greek mythology, which makes it a rare anime where western viewers are probably more familiar with the underlying legends (Heracles / Hercules, for example), than the Japanese audience. Perhaps for that reason, *Arion* takes outrageous liberties with the stories.

For a start, the film presents the Greek gods – Zeus and the rest of the Olympian pantheon – as effectively *human* rulers. There are monsters and supernatural elements, and visits to places like Hades and Tartarus, but the gods wage land wars with soldiers and chariots (parts of the film resemble *Heroic Legend of Arslan*).

Arion, the hero, is even more human. As a child, he's enticed away from his home and mother, and forced to battle monsters in the underworld kingdom of the sinister, shaggy-haired Hades. The gods themselves are at war, and Hades intends to use Arion as his pawn, tempting him with the chance of curing his mother's blindness.

Returning to the surface world as a youth, Arion encounters several gods, including the warrior-queen Athena and the sea god Poseidon, who's apparently his father. If you're picturing Poseidon as some mer-giant, you'll be disappointed. In keeping with the film's approach, he's a human-sized ship captain, albeit with some fishy Gill-men under his command.

The start of *Arion* is great, one thing after another, with a series of exciting fights and chases. Around the middle, there are twist developments, some characters vanish and others are foregrounded, and there's a plot strand about a cursed hero that'll be familiar if you know the Orestes legend.

This is also where the two-hour film starts feeling directionless (the downside of the "one thing after another" approach). But *Arion* comes together impressively for some terrific multiple climaxes, including an aerial battle on the back of a monster bird (shades of Moebius' comics) and a confrontation with a wicked mother goddess – the film's only *titanic* deity – in what looks like her own fleshy womb.

Like many manga adaptations, there are too many characters for a single film, with the nominal heroine – a beautiful mute girl who falls instantly for Arion – reduced to a suffering cipher. Rather, the film is stolen by Arion's bratty kid sidekick, who's voiced by actress Mayumi Tanaka more than a decade before she became Luffy in *One Piece*. Maybe that connection, as well as Yasuhiko's name, will finally get *Arion* a proper Anglophone release one day.



MYTH MAKERS



Arion had design input from Ryoko Yamagishi, a famed female manga artist whose career began in the 1960s. Her works include *Shiroi Heya no Futari* (*Our White Room*) in 1971; this was a pioneering lesbian-themed girls' manga, published in *Ribon*.



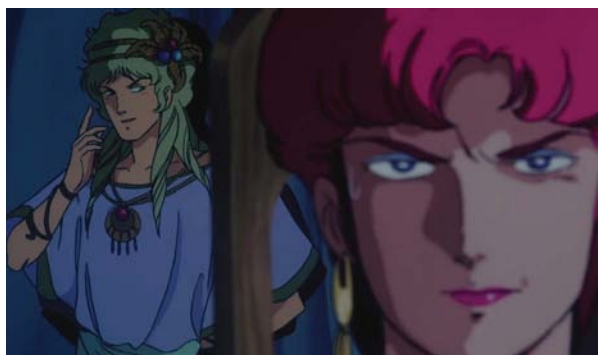
Mayumi "Luffy" Tanaka voiced Arion's sidekick Seneca. In the same year 1986, she also voiced Pazu, the miner-boy hero of Miyazaki's *Laputa*. Tanaka had previously voiced the boy hero of a giant robot series, 1984's *Giant Gorg*, directed by Yasuhiko.



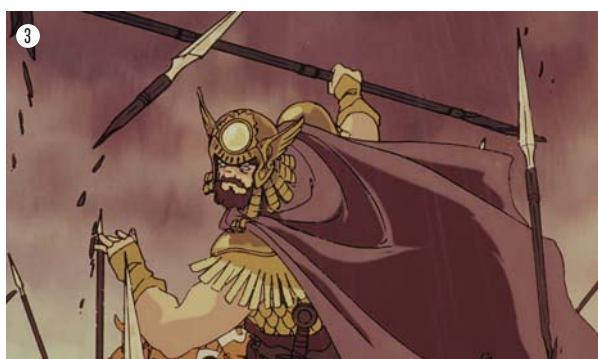
1

THE NAUSICAA CONNECTION

Arion's excellent music is by Joe Hisaishi, famed as Miyazaki's regular composer for three decades (and who worked on the soundtrack of *Ni No Kuni II*). As is often the case with Hisaishi's non-Miyazaki scores (like his one for the live-action *Hana-Bi*), it sometimes has obvious echoes of his Miyazaki music, *Nausicaä* especially. Moreover, many of *Arion's* sound effects seem lifted specifically from *Nausicaä*, especially in the last battles. The red-haired warrior queen Athena has a screen presence like *Nausicaä's* Kushana, though Athena reveals a far more perverse, *Games of Thrones*-ish personality.



2

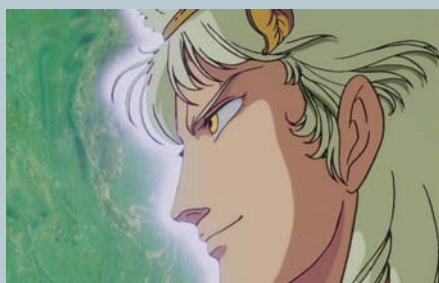


3

SPACE WARS

Yasuhiko's other anime movies were both sci-fi adventures. 1983's pulpy *Crusher Joe* includes the first screen appearance (in a cameo) by the disaster-prone *Dirty Pair* heroines. 1989's *Venus Wars* was an early videotape release by Manga Entertainment. Like *Arion*, it was based on a Yasuhiko manga, with music by Hisaishi, though it's not a patch on its predecessor. Yasuhiko himself said he disliked the *Venus Wars* film so much that he took a long sabbatical from anime after it was released.

1. Arion (centre) with his two most loyal allies in the film. 2. Gaia, the only true *titanic* titan. 3. Poseidon may be god of the sea, but he's a badass on land too...



Apollo is voiced by Hiroataka Suzuoka, who was the captain Bright Noa through several incarnations of *Gundam*. Another version of Apollo, now a super-alien rather than a god, figures in a 1960s *Star Trek* episode.



Other 1980s anime drew on Greek myth. There was *Ulysses 31* (pictured), shown in Britain, there was also the huge *Saint Seiya* franchise, which will have a CG remake this year from Netflix. Miyazaki's *Nausicaä* also takes her name from Greek myth.



MAYAMADA

Head to mayamada.com to pick up your copy, and also get your hands on some merch, including T-shirts, sweatshirts and even gift cards!



MARTIANS

The manga is set in the distant future where mankind has colonised parts of Mars. It's only a suggestion, but we think Elon Musk would really like this story.

[MANGA REVIEW]

SERIOUS VOLUME 1 COLLECTOR'S EDITION

LIMITED EDITION // MAYAMADA // LAO K, LARA-LEE GREEN, PINALI
// ACTION // £15.00

PLOT Blake is a young rabbit with big business dreams. Living in the tough, impoverished town of Serveton, he wants to make it in the big city – The Jungle. Will his ambition be enough? The only way to make your dreams come true is to go out and forge them with your own hands...

The fantasy television network world of mayamada tells many stories – one of them is the tale of Blake Serious. A young rabbit with dreams so ambitious they'd make Lord Sugar prick his ears up, Blake starts the story selling mobile phone cases

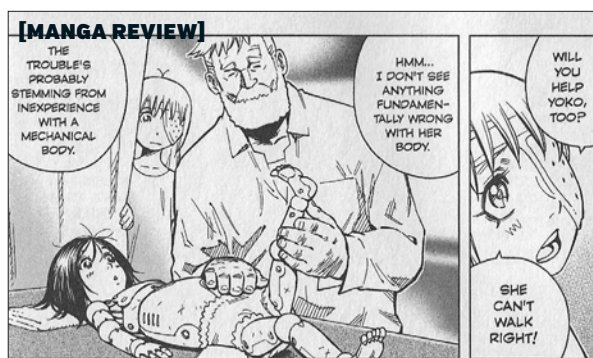


door to door. When his sales partner is mysteriously spirited away to The Jungle, Blake decides it's time to get really *serious*, and embarks on a journey that's part kung-fu training, part RPG quest, in order to start a business empire so great everyone will have to take notice.

This limited edition, collector's volume features new cover art, plus a new post-credit story and sketch pages (with some lovely, insightful commentary from the creators about everything from the cover design to the characters), adding nearly 20 pages extra to the 121 page original story.

A British-born, business-based manga story with a whole lotta heart. The *Serious* collector's edition is the best way to experience Blake's adventure. ●

★★★★★



BATTLE ANGEL ALITA MARS CHRONICLE VOL.1

OUT NOW // KODANSHA COMICS // OT // SCI-FI // £5.99 // YUKITO KISHIRO

PLOT Before Hollywood gets its claws in the *Battle Angel Alita* story, enjoy it unsullied with the so-called 'final chapter' to the manga franchise.

Mars. A desolate, war-torn planet. Remote, dead, barren. Certainly no place for orphans. Yet Erica Wald and her clumsy, robotic companion, Yoko, are there nevertheless, victims of the conflict and without a home. Taken to the orphanage, bullied

and neglected, they must endure the harsh realities of their unwanted existence...

Mars Chronicle is the ongoing manga series from original *Battle Angel Alita* author Yukito Kishiro, who made his debut at 17 with *Space Oddity*. *Alita* is by far his most famous work, and here he tackles the final instalment of the franchise, which began in 2014 and is still ongoing. The story will alternate between two timelines, giving fans an indispensable look at Alita's (aka Yoko's) early life – but newcomers may find it's better to start with the original manga to get the most out of this one...

A look back at the origins of one of manga's most enduring action heroines. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND

NEO RELEASE ROUND-UP

THE STATE OF THE UK MARKET THIS MONTH

IT'S GOING TO be a busy next few weeks, assuming (as always) that titles don't slip. Manga Entertainment has one of the biggest of them, in the muscled shape of *Jojo's Bizarre Adventures*, based on an epic action cycle about a super powered family.

Written by Hirohiko Araki, the adventures span continents, centuries and timelines. Manga has the TV version which began in 2012, and has scheduled the first 26-part season for Blu-ray on 2 April. Look forward to a review of that next issue!

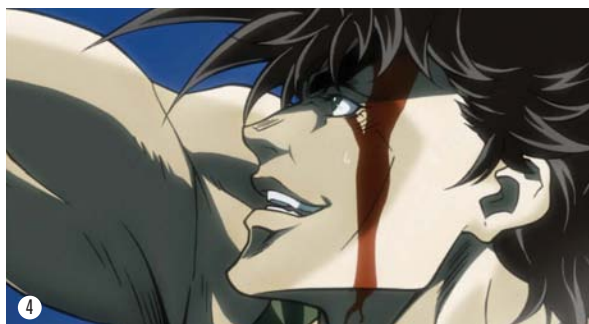
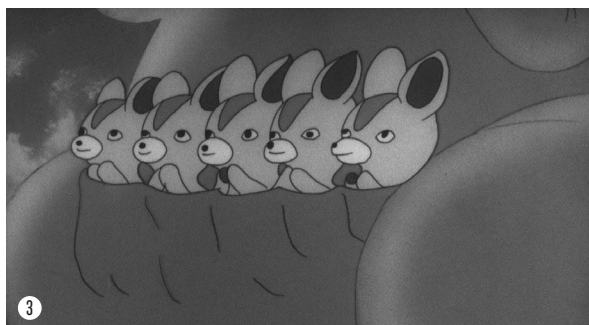
Manga also has another new title due the same day, *Occultic;Nine*. That stray semi-colon in the name looks familiar; yes, it's from the same guy who created *Steins;Gate*, *Chiyomaru Shikaru*. It's always nice to have a signature flair, isn't it?

In the series, nine people are linked by an occult-themed blog, and things quickly get *very* weird. Volume one, with the first six episodes, will be on Blu-ray and DVD. 2 April also sees Animatsu serving up new *Kinmoza!*, or *Hello! Kinmoza!* as it's now called. This is season two of the cute show about cute girls, some hailing from Blighty, and it'll be a Blu-ray / DVD combo.

Anime Limited's biggest releases have been moving back for a while, so let's hope the slippage is over. Season one of *Love Live! Sunshine!!* (see feature) is due on Blu-ray and DVD on 9 April. Kenji Kamiyama's *Napping Princess* should be with us on 19 March, as a Blu-ray, DVD and combo.

Not to mention a release that's been slipping back for ages – the combo edition of *Momotaro's Sacred Sailors*, Japan's first ever animated feature from 1945. Long-time readers may recall that we reviewed this war propaganda film back in NEO 167! Now it's back on the schedule, bundled with Jonathan Clements' full-length book on the film, for 26 March.

Anime Limited also has a standard Blu-ray of the first *Persona3* film on 19 March. That day also sees a DVD of the *Kino's Journey* show from 2003, and the last part of *Durarara!!x2* (subtitled *Ketsu*) on DVD and Blu-ray.



1. Pucker up for *Prison School* in April! 2. *Prison School* is often used in school handbooks in the UK to demonstrate unacceptable alterations to uniforms. NO SILLY TIES! 3. Have you been waiting for your slice of cute propaganda? Rumour has it *Momotaro's Sacred Sailors* is coming soon, but don't believe everything you read. 4. *Jojo* is on its way...

A standard Blu-ray of *Harmony* is due 26 March, while the Collectors Blu-ray of *Testament of New Sister Devil*, part one, is now due 2 April. A standard Blu-ray of *Prison School* is due 9 April, plus a standard Blu-ray and DVD of Makoto Shinkai's early works, *Voices* and *Place Promised*.

MVM has the 25 episodes of *Skip Beat* on Blu-ray and DVD on 26 March; the separate Blu-ray and DVD of *Monster Musume* on 2 April; the *Gate* Collectors combi edition on 9 April; and *Log Horizon* S1 on DVD on 30 April. ●



[FILM REVIEW]

THE FINAL MASTER

Kung Fu Comes Down To Earth

OUT NOW // CINE ASIA // CERT 15 // MARTIAL ARTS // £15.99 (DVD),
£17.99 (BLU-RAY) // 105 MINS

PLOT Anyone seeking to open a new martial arts school in the city of Tianjin must defeat eight local fighters first. But those who succeed will be expelled from the city to preserve the reputation of Tianjin's martial artists, which presents a quandary for Wing Chun master Chen Shi (Liao Fan).

Chen is the last in his lineage of Wing Chun fighters and is determined to preserve the style. On the advice of Zheng Shang-Ao (Chin Shih-Chieh), the reigning Grandmaster of Tianjin, Chen recruits a coolie called Geng Liangchen (Song Yang) to be his disciple and to fight in his place. Then once Geng has beaten the required eight fighters, he will face expulsion – or possibly assassination – and Chen will be free to open his school. But as the military starts to take an interest in the activities of the martial arts schools and rival masters manoeuvre for influence and power, Chen is swept up in events beyond his control.

The Final Master is written, directed and choreographed by Xu Haofeng who adapted the screenplay from his own novel. Xu was one of the writers on Wong Kar-wai's *The*

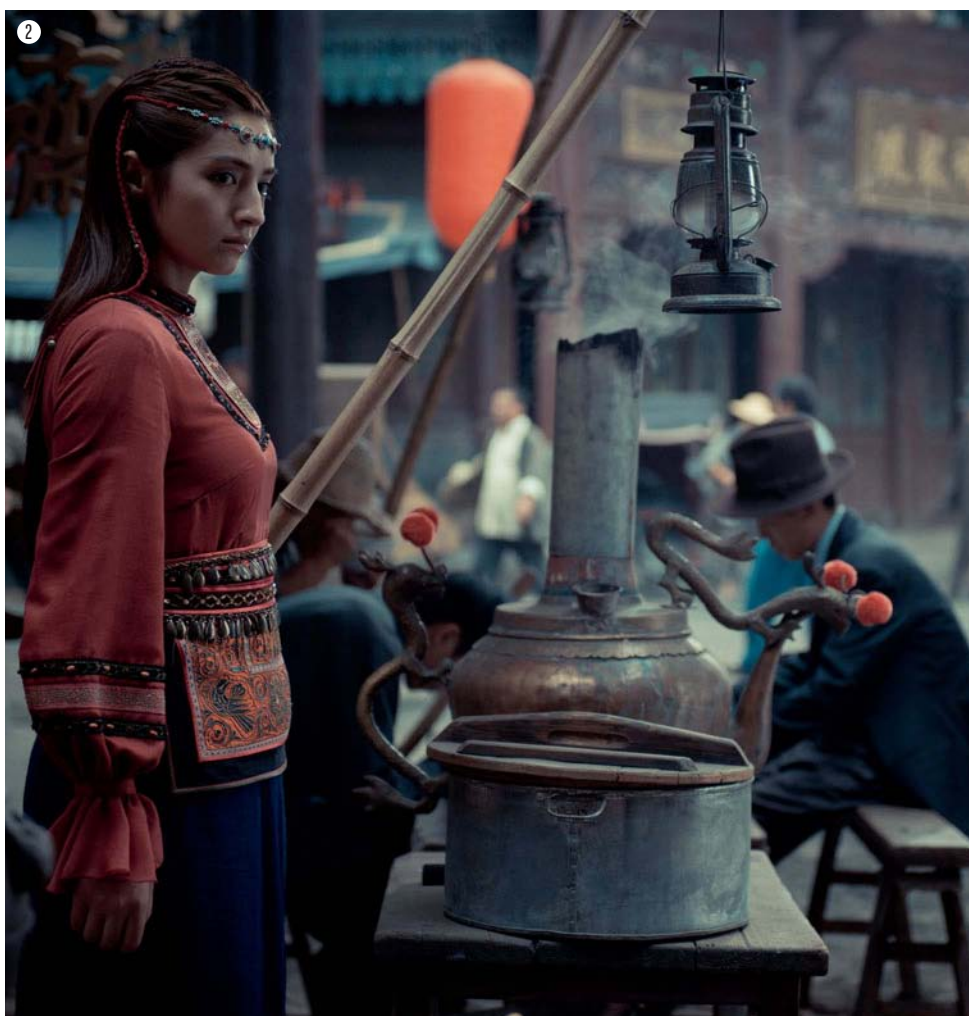
Grandmaster and is the grandson of a prominent Hsing Yi instructor, so he's well versed in kung fu. *The Final Master* is set within the Wu Lin – a fictional world of martial artists that comes from the wuxia literary tradition. The fighters and masters of Tianjin conduct their duels and rivalries in private. Xu expresses this idea in the sequence where Chen fights his way up an alley, leaving a swathe of unconscious and battered foes in his wake, only to emerge into a bustling street where the ordinary citizens of Tianjin go about their everyday business, heedless of the battle that took place just out of their sight.

Xu appears to be angling his film firmly in the pantheon of the Chinese martial arts film. There's a scene in which the opening of a new martial arts school is celebrated with a screening of 1928's *The Burning Of The Red Lotus Monastery*, often credited as the very first martial arts movie. Xu's staging of the fight scenes is a marked departure from the wirework and special effects of the wuxia genre, the acrobatics of the Hong Kong kung fu movie, and even the languid slow motion and artful poise of Wong's *The Grandmaster*. Instead, he opts for a no-frills, naturalistic approach to the fights, unenhanced by trickery. His combatants remain firmly grounded and the bulk of the choreography is devoted to weapons forms, rather than fisticuffs.

In particular Xu showcases the butterfly knives of Wing Chun, pitting them against a huge variety of exotic and esoteric weapons, from daggers and broadswords to tridents and the massive Zhanshen knife, which looks like something

TRIVIA

Historically Tianjin was home to martial artist Huo Yuanjia (aka Fok Yuen-Gap), founder of the Jing Wu Athletic Association and the character played by Jet Li in *Fearless*.



straight out of an anime. Encounters are short and sharp, winners and losers decided in the blink of an eye. For those who favour long, drawn out action, the brevity of these tussles may come as a surprise, but Xu throws in sufficient variety and invention to keep them interesting.

There hasn't been a film to showcase the diversity of Chinese weapons to this extent since Lau Kar-Leung's

"THERE HASN'T BEEN A FILM TO SHOWCASE THE DIVERSITY OF CHINESE WEAPONS TO THIS EXTENT SINCE LAU KAR-LEUNG'S LEGENDARY WEAPONS OF KUNG FU IN 1982"

Legendary Weapons Of Kung Fu in 1982. A scene in which one character is stabbed in the belly, prompting him to bind up his wounds to struggle on, must be a nod to the films of Chang Cheh. Similarly, there are cameos from two Hong Kong kung fu veterans, with Xiong Xin-Xin and Chen Kuan-Tai popping up as Tianjin fighters, again asserting the film's place in martial arts cinema history.

As lean and direct as the fights are, the screenplay can feel tangled due to the volume of characters with hidden agendas that surround Chen. Foremost amongst these are Master Zou (Jiang Wen-Li), the female head of a martial arts

school who inherited the role from her deceased husband, Officer Lin (Huang Jue), a soldier seeking to seize control of the martial arts community, and Zheng, the Grandmaster looking for one final moment of glory before he retires.

Jiang Wen-Li brings an imperiousness to Zou that's worthy of the great Brigitte Lin, but the screenplay struggles to flesh out her motives. Song Yang is strong as Chen's pugnacious protégé Geng and the subplot concerning his attempts to woo the owner of a tea stall (Madina Memet) adds vital depth to his personality. Xu is careful to give his fighters lives beyond brawling so they're not one-dimensional.

In addition to Geng's infatuation with the tea girl, there's Chen and his courting of Zhao Guohui (Song Jia). She's a waitress who catches his eye and her backstory is a compelling one, yet Xu never really seems to know what to do with that particular thread of the plot. Song Jia is very good in the role, exuding a quiet resilience and strength in the face of adversity, but the screenplay never resolves her fate. It's possible this is deliberate to leave the way open for a sequel, otherwise the story's conclusion is more confounding than satisfying.

As the martial arts movie celebrates its 90th anniversary, it's refreshing to find a filmmaker trying something genuinely different with the genre. It's not as accessible as the works of Jackie Chan or Wu Jing, but Xu's *The Final Master* elegantly blends together arthouse aesthetics, intrigue and action. ●

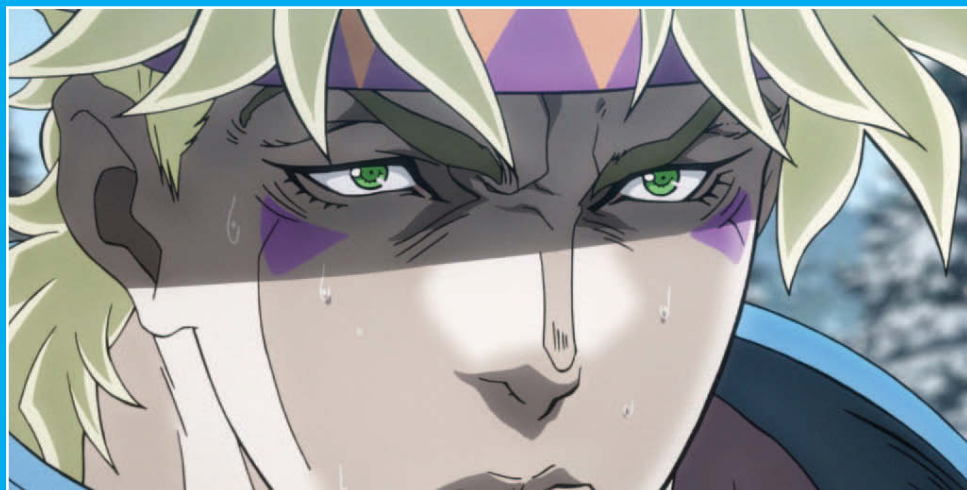
★★★★☆

1. Kung fu, it's all good clean fun until someone loses an ear. **2.** Madina Memet plays the tea girl who catches the eye and heart of the pugnacious Geng. **3.** Chen Shi is surrounded by foes on all sides. Good thing he's *The Final Master*. **4.** If you thought Wing Chun wooden dummy training was tough, now try it with added knives!

IF YOU LIKE THIS

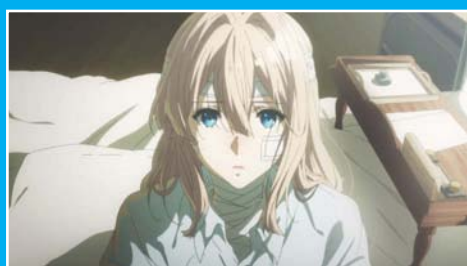
Fancy some more Wing Chun? Try Wilson Yip's *Ip Man* trilogy with Donnie Yen, but Sammo Hung's two films about the style, *Warriors Two* and *Prodigal Son*, are essential viewing.

NEXT ISSUE



JOJO'S BIZARRE ADVENTURE

JOIN THE JOESTAR DYNASTY AS THEY FIGHT SUPERNATURAL FOES IN ONE OF JAPAN'S MOST INSANE STORIES EVER...



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MANGA EXTRACT

RITUAL

By Shazleen Khan



THIS ISSUE, WE have a short story from Shazleen Khan, which you can find in its complete form on the following pages! We asked Khan to tell us more about the action in the extract. “This short story is set in a magical boarding school; the main character Katrina has returned to her dorm room at an unexpectedly late hour,” she tells us. “Suspicious, her roommate Anat questions Katrina only to receive a rather far-fetched explanation.”

We wondered if the short story had any links to previously published work from the artist. “It doesn’t really directly link to any of my other work currently!” she said. “I’d like to do more with these characters though, as Katrina is a pretty interesting one to write.”

We really enjoyed the occult theme of the short story, so we wanted to know more about what inspired Khan to use that as her subject matter. “I think more of my comics have started to involve large, primordial creatures or mythical figures in recent years, since exploring the relationship between normal people and the unknown is really interesting to me!” she confessed. “I like thinking about how a normal

person would react when, for example, they were faced with talking to a deity they worshipped or a monster they feared as a child.”

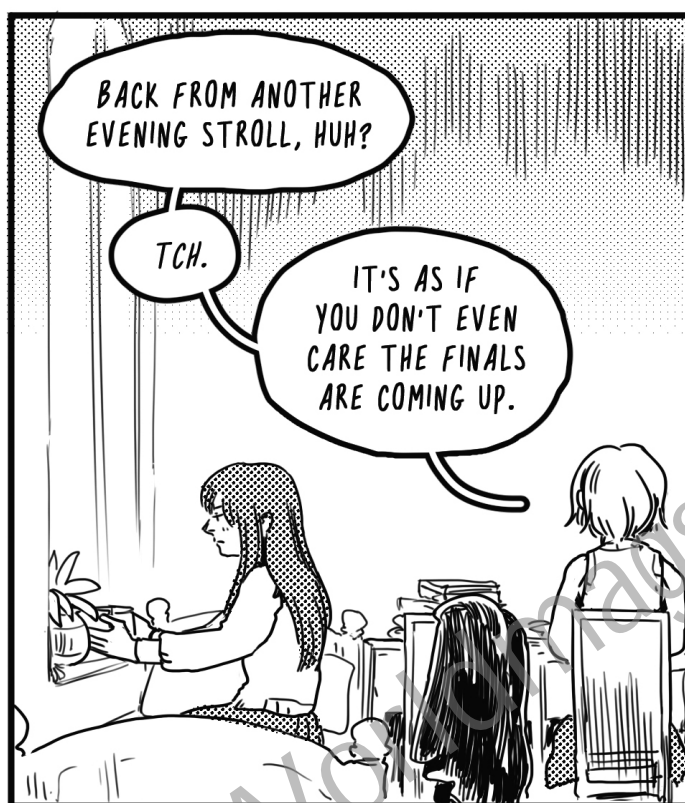
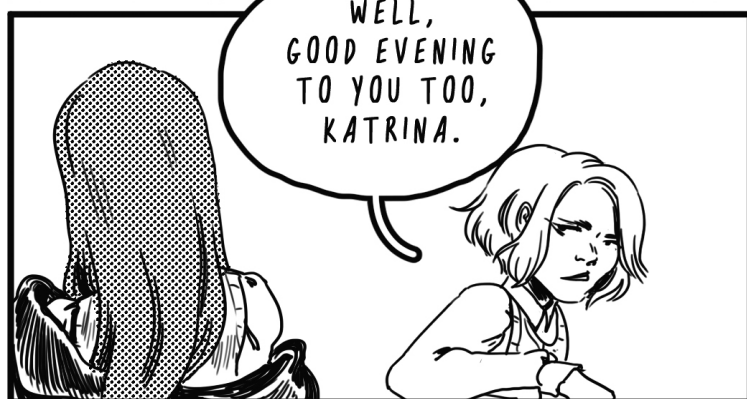
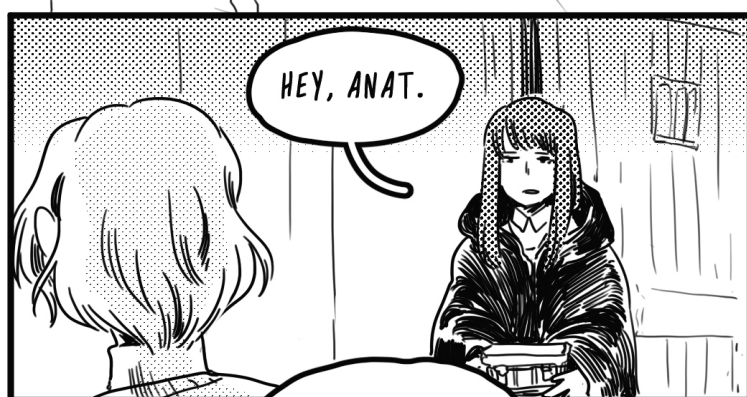
We asked Khan to tell us more about her other work. “I created my trilogy of graphic novels called *White Violet*, which I finished back in 2016. It’s published by Sweatdrop Studios!

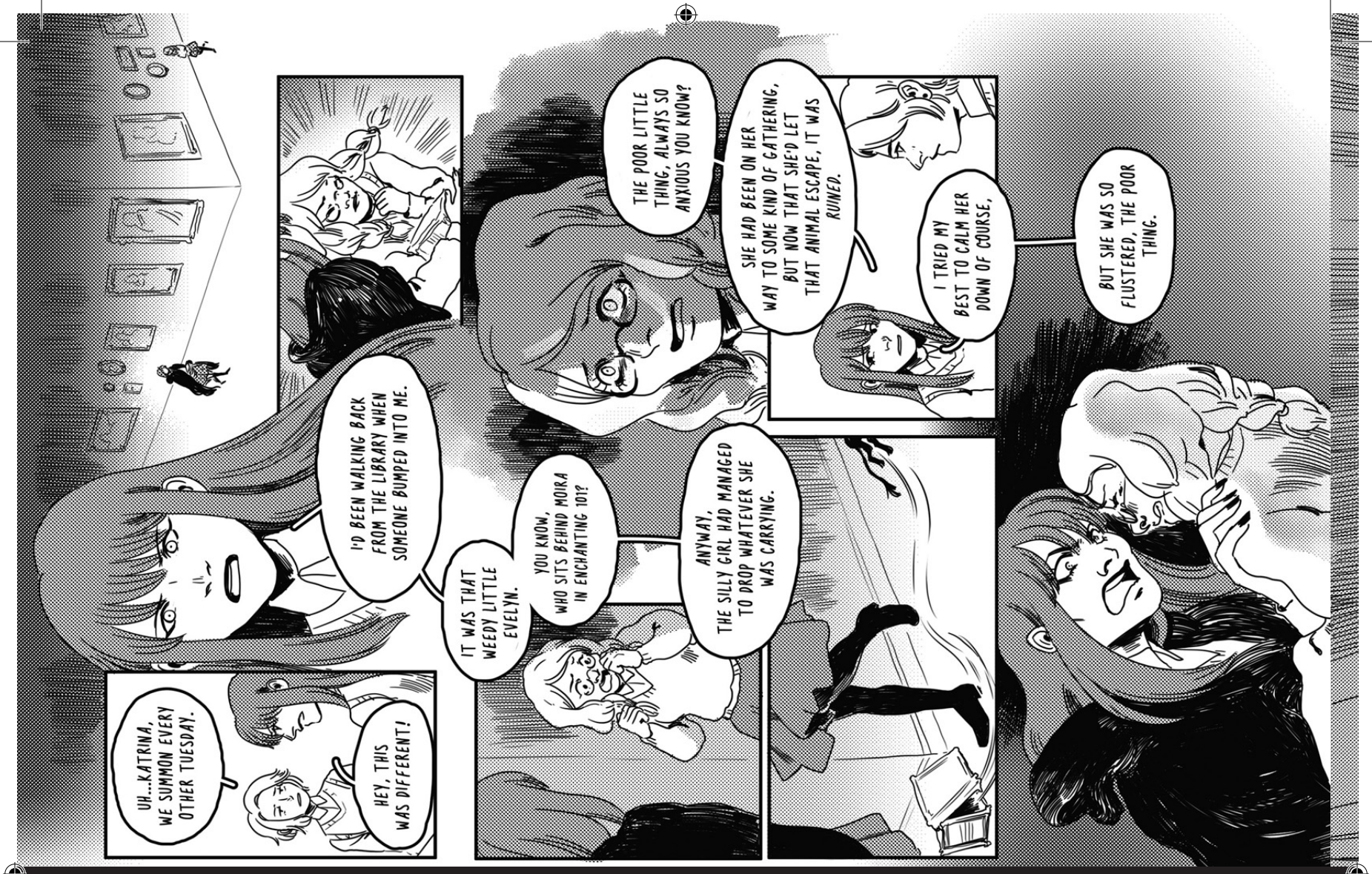
“Recently I’ve been working mainly on short comics; my most recent being this one, *The Thunderbird*, and an adaption / alternate ending to Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*. I’ve put the latter three into an anthology called *All Our Gods Are Kickin’*, which is available over on my Gumroad!”

We asked Khan to let us know what she is working on now. “I hope to make another *Carmilla*-inspired short comic for an upcoming music anthology I’m a part of!”

Find Khan online in a variety of places! Her website is located at www.shazleenkhan.com, her Instagram handle is [@neonlanterns](https://www.instagram.com/neonlanterns), her Twitter is [@neonlanterns](https://twitter.com/neonlanterns), and she even has a shop where you can find her zines and comics at <https://gumroad.com/shazleenkhan>.

Enjoy the short story!





UH...KATRINA,
WE SUMMON EVERY
OTHER TUESDAY.

HEY, THIS
WAS DIFFERENT!

I'D BEEN WALKING BACK
FROM THE LIBRARY WHEN
SOMEONE BUMPED INTO ME.

IT WAS THAT
WEEDY LITTLE
EVELYN.

YOU KNOW,
WHO SITS BEHIND MOIRA
IN ENCHANTING 101?

ANYWAY,
THE SILLY GIRL HAD MANAGED
TO DROP WHATEVER SHE
WAS CARRYING.

THE POOR LITTLE
THING, ALWAYS SO
ANXIOUS YOU KNOW?

SHE HAD BEEN ON HER
WAY TO SOME KIND OF GATHERING,
BUT NOW THAT SHE'D LET
THAT ANIMAL ESCAPE, IT WAS
RUINED.

I TRIED MY
BEST TO CALM HER
DOWN OF COURSE,

BUT SHE WAS SO
FLUSTERED, THE POOR
THING.

OH STOP
IT!

SINCE YOU ALWAYS HAVE
YOUR NOSE STUCK IN A BOOK.

I'M SURPRISED YOU
EVEN NOTICED I WAS
GONE ANAT...

HAH!

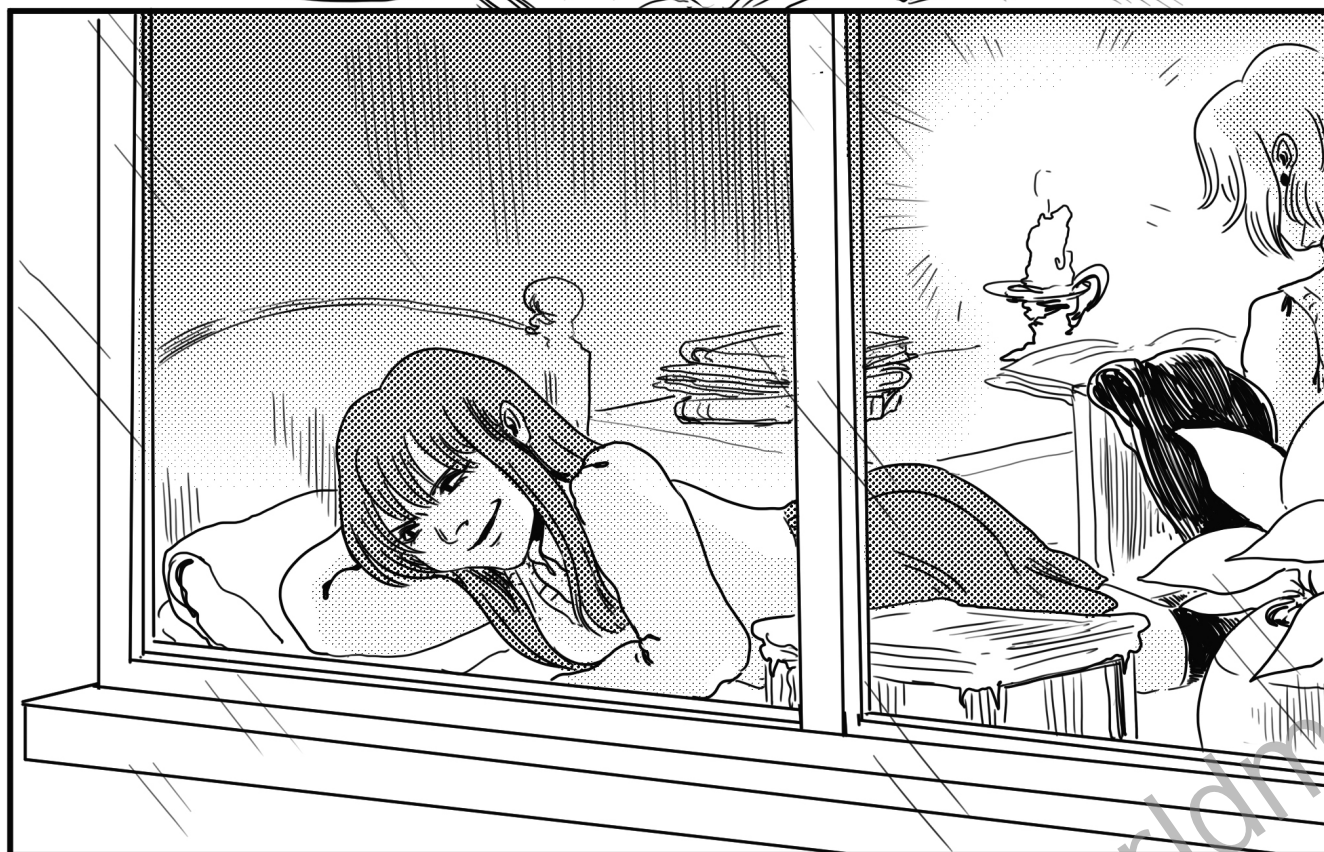
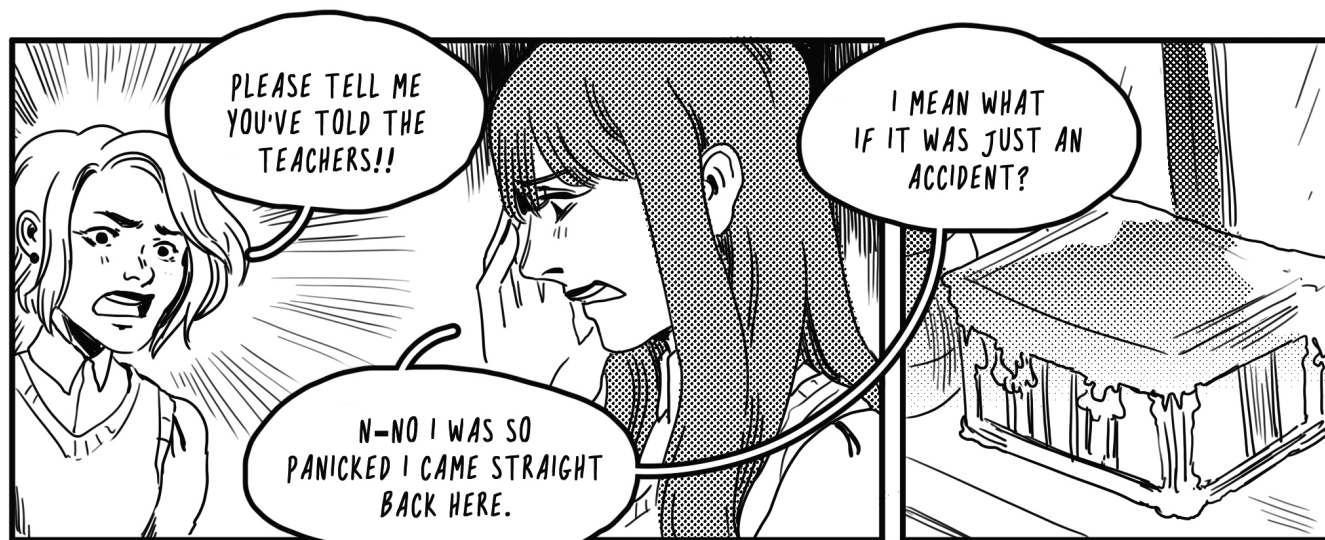
YOU REALLY
SHOULDN'T STAY OUT
SO LATE.

SO?
SPIT IT OUT.

ERGH...
FINE. IT'S JUST
TODAY...

I CAN TELL YOU'RE
ITCHING TO TELL
ME SOMETHING.

...I SAW
A DEMON SUMMONING.



DRONE

MAGAZINE



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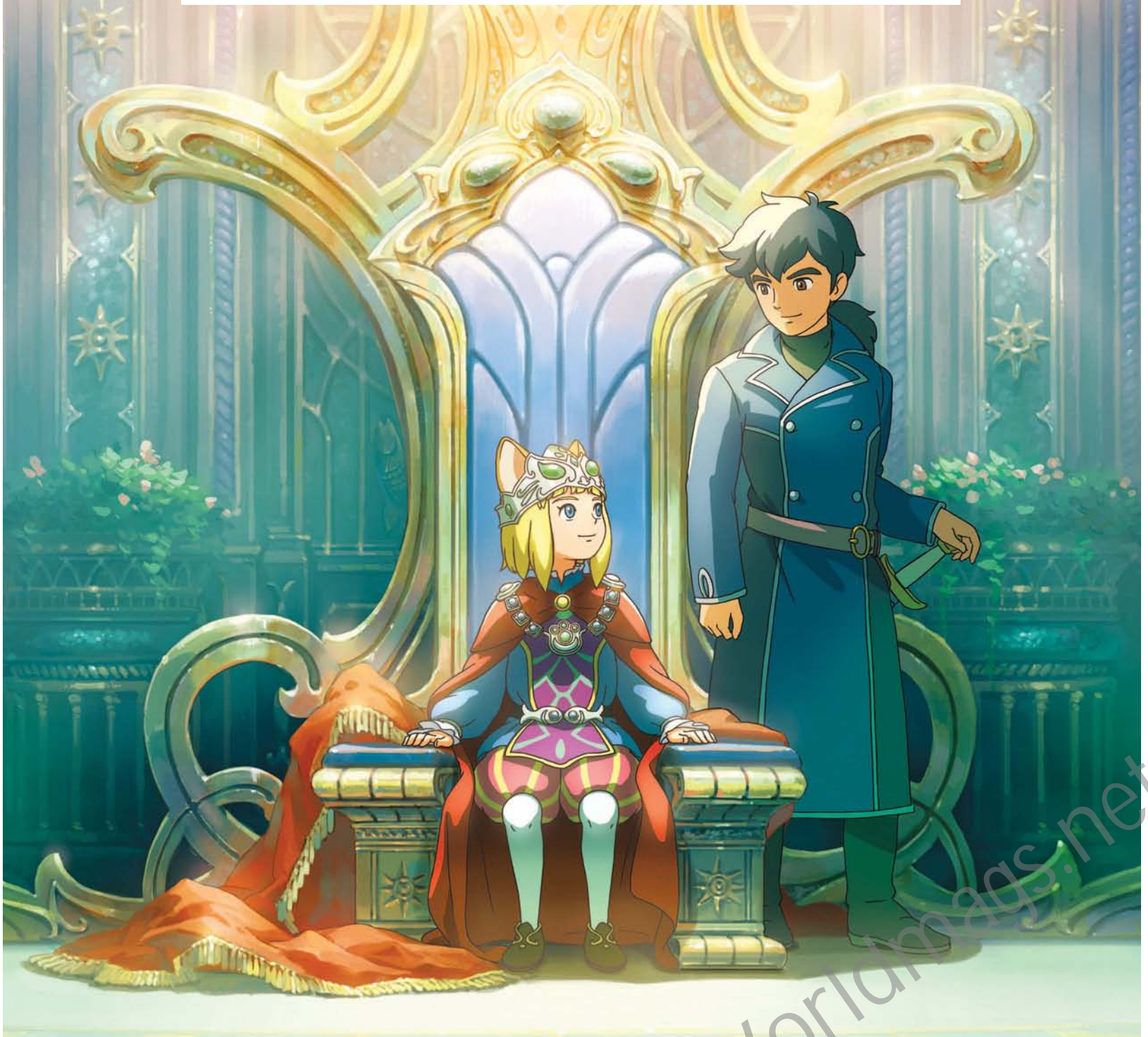
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NI NO KUNI II: REVENANT KINGDOM

Mitchell Lineham journeys to the kingdom of Ding Dong Dell to find out what makes Bandai Namco's sequel the must-play JRPG of 2018...



Worldmags.net



RECOMMENDED

If you like this then you should dig out your PS3 and give 2007's *Folklore and Eternal Sonata* a go. If you fancy something a little more current day, then *World of Final Fantasy*, *Nights of Azure*, and *Tales of Berseria* should more than satisfy that itch.

Ni no Kuni: *Wrath of the White Witch* was a magical collaboration between renowned JRPG-developer Level-5 and legendary animation studio Studio Ghibli, giving fans the opportunity to finally be able to play through a game that felt like part of the fantastical worlds of the latter's movies. *Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom* takes fans on a bigger journey that promises to be every bit as memorable, even if Studio Ghibli has less of a hand in it – talent from the studio has still pitched in on character designs and the soundtrack, but otherwise Level-5 have been left to their own devices. This means that you get a taste of that heart-warming Studio Ghibli magic once again in video game form. Expect a lot of child-like wonder and awe in developer Level-5's biggest game yet.

Oliver's story may be over, but the story of the inhabitants of that world continues. Set hundreds of years after the first game, the action opens with the cat and mouse tribes at war over who should run the kingdom of Ding Dong Dell. Evan Pettwhisker Tildrum, the rightful king of the cat tribe, is usurped and banished from Ding Dong Dell. Refusing to accept this turn of events, Evan sets out on an adventure with Roland, who is from another world, and Tani, a daughter of a well-known sky pirate.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD OPENS UP

Wrath of the White Witch's more personal story is replaced by one that encompasses all of Ding Dong Dell and its surrounding cities, as Otto, the rat king of Ding Dong Dell, has malicious plans for his newfound power. Instead of aiming to reclaim Ding Dong Dell, Evan decides to create the kingdom of Evermore with plans to have it be a kind, prosperous kingdom where all its citizens are treated well.

To do this though, he needs the support of others, and this is the purpose of his journey. Deeper sub-plots promise

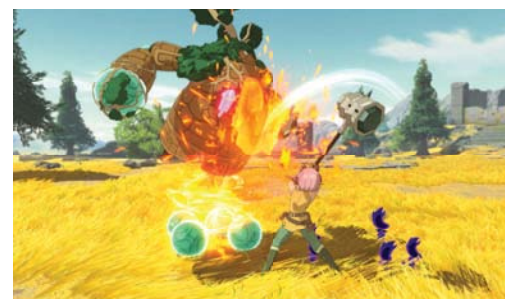
to bring players closer to the inhabitants of this world, where you'll solve people's problems and bring Evan another step closer to being a king worthy of his people. A king needs to understand the needs and desires of his people if he wishes to be successful, after all!

The focus in the voice-acting on authentic regional dialects from around the UK and beyond recaptures the charm of the original game. These diverse accents help to create the atmosphere that Level-5 are going for – immersing the player in a host of colourful, charming and varied locations that feel deeply thought-out and enchanting. We even have a new companion in the form of Lofty, who replaces Drippy – although his role is a lot deeper than a mere mascot.

FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHTS

A deeper combat system promises to please those who want full control over their team, as you can switch between characters on the fly and utilise their different strengths. Mixing up your melee, ranged and special abilities to create flowing combos means that there's plenty to experiment with, and you won't miss out on compelling Japanese gameplay elements in the ditching of the turn-based system of *Wrath of the White Witch*. The Studio Ghibli magic is being put to good use with the brand new Higgledies: small, magical creatures who help Evan on his journey. They come together to heal and buff you in battle whilst damaging your foes. Looking like a cross between Ghibli soot sprites and Pikmin, they're a fantastically imaginative addition to combat, and they replace the familiars of the first game.

It wouldn't be a JRPG worth its salt without a few distractions from the story, and that's where the kingdom building mode shines. Evan's kingdom won't build itself, so it's up to you to decide which buildings and trades should be created first, and it's such a seamless, speedy process that it's



VOICE TALENT

You may not recognise the voice talent of *Ni no Kuni II*, as it's the first game for many of the English and Japanese voice actors and actresses, but some of the Japanese talent has appeared in Studio Ghibli movies. Mirai Shida, who voices Evan, voices the titular character in *Arrietty*, and Hideotoshi Nishijima (who plays Roland) voices Kiro Honji in *The Wind Rises*.



almost instantly rewarding. Later game additions may take longer, but Rome wasn't built in a day! Kingdom building isn't the only thing to hold your attention as you take a break from battling foes, because there is also Skirmish mode where you control groups of different classed Higgledies in grand real-time-strategy style battles.

There is a lot of variety in gameplay, and *Revenant Kingdom* will offer dozens of hours of gaming alongside its rich narrative – and there is even a lovely (and enormous) overworld to explore too, which is navigated using adorable chibi forms of the characters. Approach or avoid your enemies – the choice is yours... although you may regret running away when you find yourself horribly underleveled when you get to some of the game's tougher bosses.

MORE GHIBLI MAGIC

Ni no Kuni has always had one notably unique element that's drawn in a new crowd of fans, and that's that *Ni no Kuni* is

the only game series associated with Studio Ghibli – well, bar *Magic Pengel: The Quest for Color*. The company itself might have very little to do with *Revenant Kingdom* this time around, but Studio Ghibli regular composer Joe Hisaishi and former character designer Yoshiyuki Momose are both heavily involved with the sequel. Together with Level-5, the team have yet again managed to create a title that feels as if you're playing a bona fide Studio Ghibli game, recapturing that magic of the original whilst still presenting a fresh gaming experience.

Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom aims to fulfil the ambitions of the first game, and the time earned thanks to the various delays in production have been put to good use. Polished visuals, an immersive narrative, engaging gameplay and a sensational soundtrack are among the reasons why *Revenant Kingdom* is the must-play JRPG game of the year. Discover it for yourself when the game is released 23 March for PC and PlayStation 4 from Bandai Namco. >>>

1. Along the way, expect to discover strange new creatures to aid you in your fight! 2. And some new acquaintances are stranger than others! 3. There's plenty of cuteness to entice you, but there are also some scary foes too!



ROLAND

Roland is a 48-year-old man from another world, although he certainly only looks to be in his 20s! Although he is a stranger from a strange land, Roland takes a liking to Evan and stays to help him become a worthy king. Roland is pretty popular and is a natural leader, having been a president himself in his world. He's armed with a strong sense of justice, so Evan couldn't ask for a better man to be his ally. He might sometimes be torn, questioning whether what he does is right, or if it is the best course of action for his country, but Roland gets things done and will see them through until the end. He can be stubborn, but that only further fuels him to take action and be a good leader for his people.



TANI

Tani is the adopted daughter of Baku, another one of Evan's supporters, and she quickly becomes one of Evan's first allies in his journey. Just like her father, she's strong-willed and unafraid to say what she truly thinks, although is that brash sky pirate exterior just an act? Actually, Tani has a massive love for cute things, but that doesn't exactly gel with the reputation she's trying to project of being a tomboy, so she keeps it on the down-low... That's not to say that she won't open up, though. Tani proves to be one of Evan's greatest friends on his journey, providing him with the confidence and voice that he sometimes lacks.



HIGGLEDIES

Higgledies are spirits who can only be seen by those who are goodhearted, and they reside in the hearts of people and animals alike. Higgledies lend Evan and friends their power and control of elements including water, fire and wind in battle, and they can also heal and protect them. They will help you during exploration too as they can aid you in reaching areas that you would not be able to yourself. Higgledies are adorable and playful and, although they cannot speak, they seem to share Evan's kind personality.

EVAN

Evan Pettiiwhisker Tildrum is the rightful king of the cat tribe, but he was usurped by Otto Mausinger of the rat tribe. Refusing to leave Ding Dong Dell in the hands of the nefarious Otto and swearing to do his late father and mother figure Aranella proud, Evan adventures to gain allies and set up the generous kingdom of Evermore. Evan may be young, but he is working hard to become a king worthy of his people, as well as to free the residents of Ding Dong Dell from the evil grasp of Otto. He deeply trusts his new friend and advisor, Roland, to help him be the best king that he can be.





LEANDER

Leander is the advisor to Nerea, the queen of Thalassea, and one of Evan's allies. Armed with his tactical mind and powerful magic, Leander's devotion to Thalassea is next to none. What brings him to join Evan on his journey is currently unknown, but it is clear that he can hold his own in battle. Leander seems to be a man of little words, but people can see for themselves just how capable he is.



OTTO

Otto Mausinger, a member of the rat tribe, is the leader behind the coup to usurp the throne of Ding Dong Dell from Evan, its rightful ruler, and has nefarious plans for his newfound power. Having poisoned the previous king and then successfully banishing Evan from Ding Dong Dell, Otto has proven himself to be a wicked, selfish ruler with no regard for others. Grrr!



LOFTY

Lofty is more than just a mascot character - he's a Kingmaker! Each kingdom requires a Kingmaker, and the Kingmaker of Evermore is Lofty. Lofty becomes stronger as the kingdom grows, and he's one of Evermore's strongest - and most surprising - protectors when it's under attack. He recognises Evan as king and does all in his power to support Evan's ambitious goals.



ARANELLA

Aranella is Evan's mother figure, and she fights on his behalf when Otto begins his coup to take the throne as king of Ding Dong Dell. Struck down in battle before Evan's eyes, her brave sacrifice is among the many reasons why Evan is now working hard to live up to his royal heritage. Very little is known about Aranella, but Evan's love and admiration for the courageous woman is clear.

NEO'S FAVOURITE FIVE UPDATES FOR NI NO KUNI II

Improved Combat Mechanics

Ni no Kuni: Wrath of the White Witch found praise in a lot of aspects that it tackled, but one aspect that it didn't quite immerse players in was its combat. *Ni no Kuni II* completely overhauls combat mechanics by throwing away the turn-based battling and replacing it with a speedier and more versatile hack 'n' slash system. More control is given to the player and you can switch between members of your party of three on the fly, all of which have their own unique playstyles. RPG elements are present with various skills to learn and master, and you can equip up to three unique melee weapons at a time alongside one ranged weapon. Those who are worrying that *Revenant Kingdom* may forget the J in JRPG can put their worries to rest.



More Playable Characters

Oliver's friends in *Wrath of the White Witch* are memorable, but not many of them are able to join him in battle. *Revenant Kingdom* introduces more characters, and more party members, so that you can keep things feeling fresh over the course of what will seemingly be a very long game – plus new characters means new cut scenes, so you get to see even more of that lovely animation in action! Several of the new characters have been shown off in combat, and they are proving to be very unique from each other – so your party of three can be tweaked until you're perfectly happy! Not only will they play differently, but each will play a vital role in the story and be capable of things that the others are not, so be sure to give them all a go.



More Gameplay Modes

The first game featured a spectacular story, but there was little to do outside of it. *Revenant Kingdom* avoids this issue by including more modes like a skirmish mode, and a kingdom building mode – which is fit for a king.

If you're not familiar with building simulators then have no fear, because *Revenant Kingdom's* new mode is easy to come to terms with, is immensely rewarding, and nicely plays into the game's overall narrative. Skirmish is more action-based where you're accompanied by small squads of Higgledies as you make your way across a battlefield, with your end goal to be to defeat a specified enemy. It's fast-paced fun and drives home the fact that Evan is a king, and that his kingdom will come under attack.



Greater Ambition

Wrath of the White Witch featured a very personal and beautiful story with Oliver looking for a way to bring his mother back to life, but *Revenant Kingdom* aims to take us further into this fictional world with Evan's plans to build his own kingdom. He needs support though, and that means travelling the world to gain allies. With both new and returning areas to explore, Evan and friends will see more Ghibli-inspired, fantasy-heavy areas and colourful characters as the kingdom of Evermore grows. More sub-plots bring us closer to the people of this fantastical world, and each aims to be a fully fleshed-out, engaging narrative that wonderfully compliments the main story. Roland is from another world, so maybe that'll feature too!



Higgledies

The Higgledies are Ghibli-inspired creatures who help you in battle and in the game's Skirmish mode. The colour-coded beings congregate together as you battle, and once enough of them have come together you can approach them to trigger them into performing a variety of abilities, which include healing you or firing a miniature cannon at an enemy. It's not an exaggeration to say that a well-timed Higgledy heal may prevent your untimely demise in battle, and their power-ups are much appreciated.

Groups of Higgledies are also used in Skirmish where you can switch between three groups of them, who may be armed with bows and arrows, swords or other weapons, as they taste victory on the battlefield.



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